

**The Imaginary Institution of China:  
Dialectics of Fantasy and Failure in Nationalist Identification,  
as Seen through China's Han Clothing Movement**

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# **The Imaginary Institution of China: Dialectics of Fantasy and Failure in Nationalist Identification, as Seen through China's Han Clothing Movement**

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This project is an ethnographic study of the Han Clothing Movement, a newly emerging neo-traditionalist and ethno-nationalist group in contemporary urban China dedicated to promoting purportedly ancient “ethnic clothing” for the previously unmarked majority Han nationality. Based in fieldwork with movement activists in the Pearl River Delta and cities across China, this project asks: why Han Clothing, and why now?

The origins of the Han Clothing Movement are traced to the tensions of national identity, wherein a perpetually impassable gap exists between an ever expanding nationalist imaginary and an inherently limited national experience. I contrast the grandiose and romanticized ideals of the Chinese nation as five millennia of tradition promoted in reform-era discourses, representing the nationalist imaginary of China, with the underwhelming and often even disappointing daily lives of movement activists in China's cities, representing actual experience within the geographic space known as China. The Han Clothing Movement is a symptom of these tensions within national identity, and its cultural products provide fleeting cures for participants.

The resulting ethnography examines the experience of Han-ness and Chineseness in light of these tensions, reinterpreting the Han Clothing Movement's celebration of Han-ness and tradition as expressions of the distance of these elusive ideas from lived experience. The movement's cultural products, from clothing and reenacted ritual to photography, elaborate conspiracy theories, and reactionary gender politics, are analyzed in turn as steps towards the construction and stabilization of an idealized image of Han Chinese glory which perpetually fascinates participants by right of its unattainability.

This project contributes to the emerging field of Critical Han Studies through a detailed ethnographic analysis of the complex relationship of contemporary self-identified Han to the idea of Han-ness, tracing in particular the dilemmas and transformations of this idea amidst the ongoing rapid change in contemporary Chinese society. This project further contributes to a novel understanding of the nation as a perpetually elusive imaginary community, founded in fantasy and reproduced by its own impossibility, reinterpreting national identity as both a fulfilling ideal and a self-reproducing problem paradoxically fueled by the very affective tensions produced in its failure.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Kevin Carrico is a graduate of Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies (2003), where he received a degree in Chinese Studies, as well as Bard College (2002), where he completed his undergraduate studies in Asian Studies, focusing particularly upon the history and culture of post-1949 China.

Prior to pursuing his Ph.D. at Cornell University's Department of Anthropology, Kevin worked as a Chinese-to-English translator in Shanghai. Having completed his Ph.D. in the spring of 2013, he will be a Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University's Center for East Asian Studies during the 2013-14 academic year.

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## **Introduction**

### **Eternal Apparel**

The Han Clothing Movement (漢服運動) is a neo-traditionalist and ethno-nationalist youth-based movement that has emerged over the past decade in urban China, structured around the idea of revitalizing a recently created yet purportedly ancient style of national clothing for the country's Han majority. The movement is neo-traditionalist because it is dedicated to promoting a particular vision of tradition, embodied in clothing, ritual, etiquette, and accompanying lifestyles, amidst the rapid social, economic, and cultural change in China's urban areas. The movement is ethno-nationalist because the tradition that it promotes is "Han," a term which in official understandings refers to the nation's majority nationality constituting roughly 92% of its population, but which in movement discourses indicates the sole true and eternal embodiment of authentic Chineseness. And participants characterize the movement as a "clothing movement" because they believe that a supposedly eternal yet now forgotten clothing style labeled as Han Clothing (漢服 or 漢民族服裝) constitutes the cornerstone of this Han culture and thus of true Chineseness.

Beginning in 2001 with online sketches of this lost national clothing and the formation of related online forums, the movement has since expanded across China with the establishment of Han Clothing associations in most major cities. From Zhengzhou in the north to Guangzhou in the south, and from Suzhou in the east to Kunming in the west, these associations host frequent gatherings promoting Han Clothing, recreated ritual, and associated neo-traditionalist etiquette, mixed in with a fair amount of cultural-chauvinist and xenophobic rhetoric. Individual participants in these cities, connected through national and local Han-themed forums, gather

together two or three weekends a month both to celebrate the movement's vision of Han-ness and to revitalize this vision as a lost but always essential reality.

Analyzing the rapid growth of this invented tradition and the sources of its popularity, my research asks, specifically: why Han Clothing, and why now? Employing participation in movement events and regular close interaction with Han Clothing enthusiasts in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhengzhou, and Kunming, my study aims to understand the motivations for the construction and reconstruction of Han-ness and Chineseness within this movement, as well as its appeal within the contexts of the broader social environment and devotees' personal lives. In terms of the ethnology of China, my research asks: why has this reconstruction of Han identity emerged at this moment in history? Why has it taken the form of clothing? And what can it tell us about trends in ethnic representation and nationalist politics in contemporary Chinese society? In terms of broader anthropological considerations, my research asks: what are the motivating factors of such ethnic-nationalist identifications? What role do "tradition" and "culture" play as ideas circulating in modern society? And what can personal investments in the idea of "the Han" as China reveal about nationalist identification in general? The product of these analyses is the first ethnography of Han-ness in today's China through the lens of Critical Han Studies, as well as a theoretical reconsideration of majority identity and nationalism.

### **Han-ness and Critical Han Studies**

This project is, first and foremost, a contribution to and expansion of the subfield of Critical Han Studies. In the recent volume Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and

Identity of China's Majority (Mullaney, et al. 2012), a number of researchers of Chinese ethnic relations and history have begun the process of applying insights from Critical Race Studies to the previously under-analyzed notion of “the Han,” modern China’s majority nationality. In his introduction to this volume, Thomas Mullaney (2012) articulates three key areas through which the volume’s essays develop a novel understanding of Han-ness. In the first area, the relationship between the category of Han and the category of China, issues of internal regional divisions and external “mixing” highlight the instability of Han-ness and Chineseness as coherent categories. In the second area, the origins of the Han category, conflicts between the supposed long history of the Han and the relative novelty of the idea of the “Han nationality” highlight the uncertainties involved in viewing Han-ness as a longstanding feature of Chinese civilization. And in the third area, the historical formation of the Han nationality, debates about the determining factors in the production of the idea of Han-ness highlight the always complex relationship between the Han and its others. The essays in this volume thus bring to light discordances between the idea of Han-ness and its cultural, historical, and relational contexts.

Insofar as my informants in the Han Clothing Movement are by no stretch of the imagination proponents of Critical Han Studies, such deconstructions would appear to them to be at best fundamental “Western” misunderstandings of the eternal essence that they celebrate as “the Han,” or at worst insults to this essence. Yet from another perspective, my acquaintances within the movement are also arguably pioneers of Critical Han Studies (albeit with a notably uncritical undertone), insofar as their movement is based in and attempts to respond to precisely the types of fundamental instabilities within the idea of the Han that Critical Han Studies analyzes. For example, although the Han is envisioned as a coherent unity, Han Clothing Movement participants note that there are no unique or unifying characteristics distinguishing the

Han in the present. Although the Han is portrayed as a nationality on the forefront of China's development, its "unmarked" and standard nature makes Han-ness considerably less exciting than corresponding minority identities. Although the Han is envisioned as the inheritor of five millennia of glorious tradition and civilization, these grandiose ideas of tradition and civilization are detached from participants' everyday experiences in their contemporary urban environment. And although the Han is portrayed as the leading majority nationality, Han Clothing Movement participants are unable to sense this position of leadership in their daily lives. In accordance with their determinedly uncritical approach to Critical Han Studies, however, movement participants strive to respond to these discordances within Han-ness as unnatural contradictions that must and most importantly can be overcome, in order to realize a complete and authentic Han-ness: these in turn are the processes that I analyze in this study.

Thus, alongside the cultural, regional, historical, and relational issues raised by Critical Han Studies, this project highlights the experiential dilemmas and uncertainties faced in the present by those labeled with the identity "Han." Although critical of the current state of Han-ness, and recognizing the inconsistencies of this label in practice, movement participants are dedicated to overcoming these inconsistencies to realize a unified, glorious, and eternal Han-ness. The Han Clothing Movement is then, in my analysis, at once a symptom of contradictions within experiential Han-ness, as well as a fleeting cure to these dilemmas, highlighting the ways in which the ideal of Han identity is perpetually reproduced by right of its elusiveness in reality.

## Nationalism and the Imaginary Community

Beyond the immediate ethnographic context of China and the status of Han-ness therein, this study furthermore pursues a reexamination of the theory of nationalism through the medium of fantasy. “The nation” is now a largely universal form of global organization and personal identification. Building upon Benedict Anderson’s influential theory of nations as imagined communities, I ask precisely how imagined communities are imagined, and particularly how the emotions characteristic of nationalist investment are produced and reproduced over time. Nationalism, in my analysis, is neither a natural, primordial bond nor a reflection of print-capitalist infrastructure nor a simplistic ideology forced upon the people by a “ruling class.” Rather, I propose that nations are primarily fantasy-based, paradoxical, and thus self-perpetuating cultural-imaginary systems.

Nations are *fantasy-based*, in my analysis, because nations are not only imagined communities, but far more importantly imaginary communities, meaning that they function as collective mediums of individuals’ “wild longings and weird fantasies” (Rée 1992:4). Drawing upon the work of Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) and Steven Sangren (2000; 2009) on the psychodynamic origins of cultural institutions and their perpetuation over time, I interpret the nation as an entity that is simultaneously far greater than oneself, yet which also includes oneself: as such, it is a uniquely powerful medium for narcissistic fantasy visions, naturalized through the ideal of identity. In the case of the Han Clothing Movement, the fantasies expressed through the imaginary community of China are a land of imperial splendor, wholeness, security, homogeneity, unity, order, control, and mystical powers. However, alongside these fantasies, nations are furthermore *paradoxical*, because the absolute grandeur of their imaginary vision inevitably leads to disappointments in practice. Nations are fundamentally split insofar as they

are grandiose imaginaries in which ideal images of security and grandeur are produced, as is the case with the American Dream or the recently articulated Chinese Dream, while at the same time existing as actual geographic spaces in which people experience their mundane and inevitably imperfect daily lives. Thus, while nations serve as a medium of the nationalist's greatest fantasies, they at the same time serve as the source of our greatest disappointments: I argue that the passion of nationalism is to be found in the gap between these two sides of the nation and the tensions that it generates and reproduces. Finally, the nation is *self-perpetuating* because the disappointments of experience lead those invested in the idea of the nation to seek solace, again, in national imaginings. Thus, the same otherworldly imaginaries that created disappointments in the first place in turn supplement experience by presenting imaginary solutions to the disappointments that they have created. Nationalism, as a result, is both an illusorily fulfilling ideal and a self-reproducing dilemma, forming a self-reproducing system fueled by the very affective tensions that its inevitable failures produce.

This theory of national identity is explicated through my ethnographic study of the Han Clothing Movement and participants' personal experiences. On the one hand, the ideas of Han-ness and the Chinese nation serve as expansive canvasses for movement participants' desires and aspirations. On the other hand, their experiences of Han-ness and Chineseness fail to correspond to these hopes. Yet their solution to these disappointments is found only in a further and deeper investment in the ideas of Han-ness and Chineseness as supplements to an inevitably disappointing reality. The following chapters trace the trials and tribulations of movement participants between their ideals and the stubborn contemporary realities in which they dwell, developing a novel perspective on the passions and continued influence of the nation-form as a mode of collective organization and personal identification.

## Methodology

This study is based primarily in a year of fieldwork with Han Clothing Movement participants in urban China, extending from the summer of 2010 to the summer of 2011. My research base was in the Pearl River Delta city of Guangzhou, where I was affiliated with Sun Yat-sen University, and the neighboring new metropolis of Shenzhen. Both of these cities are home to large, well-established, and quite active branches of the Han Clothing Movement. My research activities consisted primarily of participating in movement events, visiting Han Clothing stores, and spending time with Han Clothing Movement participants outside of movement events. Interviews were primarily unstructured and completely open-ended discussions, at times with groups of enthusiasts, so as to understand group communication and dynamics, and at times with individual participants, so as to examine enthusiasts' personal perspectives and motivations. My goal in these various research activities was to develop a total view of participants' lives, observing on the one hand their ordinary living environments and lifestyles in the bustling urban chaos of the Pearl River Delta, and on the other hand their quite extraordinary self-recreation through the ideal of Han-ness and five millennia of tradition.

Although my research base was in South China, one of the main centers of Han Clothing activity, I also conducted a series of research trips to meet with Han Clothing enthusiasts and associations in other cities, such as Zhengzhou, Kunming, and Beijing. Combined with my work in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, this collection of cities extended geographically across the nation of China: from the expansive cityscapes of the Pearl River Delta in the south, to the historically rich yet currently economically impoverished region of Zhengzhou in the north, to the ethnically diverse city of Kunming in the west, to the center of national politics in Beijing, my research



**Figure 1- Cities visited during fieldwork from 2010 to 2011**

trips provided samples of a broad spectrum of living environments for thinking through the motivations and aspirations of movement participants. My research was further supplemented by extended research trips to neo-traditionalist educational institutions affiliated with the movement in Haikou, Suzhou, and Dongguan, to analyze the movement's extension beyond clothing. Finally, a touristic journey through the Dali region provided an opportunity to examine the ways in which ethnic minorities in China are portrayed to Han visitors, so as to provide a point of comparison with the movement's novel approach to Han self-representation.

In addition to my fieldwork, I have also closely followed Han Clothing Internet culture for the past four years, from the main forums on sites such as [hanminzu.com](http://hanminzu.com), to local Han Clothing discussion groups on the popular chatting interface QQ, to comments on Weibo,



China's version of Twitter, to video compilations on Youku, China's version of Youtube. Attention to Han-ist popular culture was combined with attention to similar nationalist and traditionalist trends and ideas in broader popular culture for the sake of comparison. From participant observation, to discussions, to research trips, to the study of Han Clothing media, I have aimed to immerse myself in the aspirations and concerns of my research subjects, so as to understand the appeal of Han Clothing and its associated imaginings.

In the analyses that follow, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and all attempts have been made to ensure that no informant can be identified based upon my descriptions. The sole exception to this practice is the discussion of Chen Zhanbing in Chapter 4, because Chen is a public figure who will be immediately recognizable to any Han Clothing enthusiast, as well as to any readers familiar with the culture of the Han Clothing Movement.

### **On the Question of Critical Anthropology**

Beyond the admittedly distinctive nature of my fieldwork with a neo-traditionalist group in contemporary urban China, this study is perhaps also unique by right of its critical stance with regard to informants' worldviews and beliefs. This is an approach with which many of my colleagues may disagree. In the field of anthropology, the denunciation of the colonial past has produced an environment in which critique can seemingly only be applied to "the West," while the simplistic application of postmodernism and dogmatic cultural relativism promotes an uncritical ethnographic stance in which the anthropologist is to serve primarily as a cultural transcriber, abandoning analysis. Correspondingly, in the highly politically charged field of

China studies, identification with romanticized ideas of China combined with state pressures on research have produced notable hesitations amongst some scholars within the field to address sensitive matters of politics, history, and ethnicity directly. Identifying fully with one's area of study (or at least the official representation thereof), the goal of such superficially friendly work becomes the task of representing a politically correct viewpoint known as "China's perspective" to the world against various perceived villains, such as "cultural hegemony," "global capitalism," or "imperialism."

Such approaches were certainly possible in the preparation of this volume. I could have argued, for instance, that Han Clothing is a valiant native response to the cultural imperialism and homogenization of globalization, working against hegemony to reassert China's voice and tradition on the world stage. I could have easily provided an abundance of quotations from interviews to support this viewpoint, arguing that Han Clothing is in fact the sole authentic representation of a true Chinese tradition in the present. And I could have very easily taken movement discourses and movement histories at face value as truths to share with the world, interpreting these histories as of course having equal truth value to any other history. The result would undoubtedly be a feel-good text in which I would be cast, all too conveniently, as a benevolent representative (cf. Kulick 2006) communicating for the "Han people" on the "world stage."

The problem with such an approach, however, is that I would find it not only thoroughly dishonest but also immensely patronizing. Rather than tailoring my analyses to avoid critical engagement and hence avoiding potential accusations of "Orientalism" or collusion with ubiquitous "anti-China forces," I argue instead that the condescending suggestion that phenomena in China must be removed from critical analysis and handled uniquely delicately is

in fact the epitome of Orientalism and anti-China thinking. On a daily basis, people discuss, question, and challenge many of the assumptions underlying our existence in “the West.” Do races exist? How has “whiteness” been constructed as the default race? How do mythologies of George Washington and other founders shape our (mis)understanding of national history? How does the representation of our racial past and present reproduce real inequalities? What do practices of indefinite detention and torture say about the direction in which the United States is moving? And what exactly is going on in the minds of Tea Party participants? Although not always well-received, such critical analysis pushes against the boundaries of conventional thinking and sheds new light upon our world. To treat China or any other country with a different standard is then a thoroughly Orientalist approach, insofar as it is based in the assumption that “they” are not ready for critical reflection, and must rely upon our continual praise and support, which we so benevolently provide. Such an approach is not only a disservice to academic work but also a disservice to the country of China, benefiting only the supporters of this perplexing moralization.

Considering the passions of nationalism noted in my analysis, my critical study of these ideas may indeed arouse such passions. And considering the dedication which Han Clothing Movement participants have repeatedly demonstrated towards the movement, my interpretation of their ideas, beliefs, and practices will likely be disappointing to many. Yet I would like to emphasize that the viewpoints featured in this study are in the end products of a deep empathy with participants’ perspectives and motivations for joining this movement, factors which I have traced in detail in the chapters that follow. My empathy, however, extends neither to the results of participation nor to the often outlandish beliefs produced therein. It is logically possible to be empathetic with the trials and dilemmas that someone is facing, while nevertheless strongly

disagreeing with their proposed solutions to these dilemmas. This is the situation in which I have found myself: I can thus only hope that the Han Clothing enthusiasts with whom I have worked over the past few years might recognize the empathy in my critique, insofar as I have strived to understand the world through their eyes, despite my disagreement with the products of their worldview.

## **Overview**

This study is divided into two main sections. The first section, entitled “The Imaginary Institution of China” consists of two chapters which provide the theoretical and historical background for my ethnography of the Han Clothing Movement. The first chapter, entitled “Imaginary Communities: Dialectics of Fantasy and Failure in Nationalist Identification,” presents a new interpretation of the phenomenon of nationalism as structured through fantasy, meaning that nations are not only imagined communities but also fundamentally imaginary communities. I argue through ethnographic examples and engagement with theories of nationalism that the passions characteristic of nationalism can be attributed to its production of a paradoxical and self-reproducing affective system caught perpetually between national imaginings and national realities. The second chapter, entitled “Between Heaven and Earth: Cycles of Nationalist Imagining and Experience in Modern China,” applies this theoretical framework to a rereading of the modern history of China. I argue that the series of national awakenings in modern Chinese history since the collapse of the all-encompassing imperial worldview in the late Qing Dynasty have in fact been attempts to recapture lost dreams of a heaven that never existed. Tracing these awakenings from the anti-Manchu fanaticism of early

nationalist author Zou Rong, to the mystical proletarian nationalism of the Maoist era, to the calculated politics of gradualism in the reform era, I argue that what is commonly glossed as “rising nationalism” is instead an example of affectively charged imagining in response to the disenchantment and banality of present realities.

The second section, entitled “Returning to the Era of the Han and Tang,” consists of five chapters which present my analysis of the Han Clothing Movement as a collective movement driven by personal desires. Chapter 3, “Han Trouble and the Ethnic Cure,” provides a brief history of the Han Clothing Movement over the past decade, locating the movement’s stated goals in the celebration and revitalization of the Han, tradition, and the real China. Yet ethnographic analysis of actual movement practices demonstrates that the movement’s ideas of Han, tradition, and China are primarily products of their opposites: minority ethnicity, modernity, and an imaginary China, such that the Han Clothing Movement is caught perpetually between its ideals and their opposites. Chapter 4, “The Personal Origins of Collective Identity,” similarly demonstrates that the collective identity and ideals of the Han Clothing Movement are products of and responses to personal desires. Five case studies of Han Clothing Movement participants’ everyday lives in cities across China trace how personal aspirations and dilemmas are expressed and imaginarily resolved through fantasies of a coherent, glorious, and eternal majority identity promoted by the movement. Chapter 5, “Reenacting the Land of Rites and Etiquette,” examines three primary Han Clothing Movement objects and practices: ethnic clothing, ritual, and photography. I argue that each of these components of the movement enacts growing abstraction from participants’ living environment in the material world towards the fleeting realization of their ideal image of the self and the nation affirmed through “five millennia of tradition.”

Chapter 6, “The Paranoid Style in Chinese Cultural Politics,” examines the extremely elaborate network of conspiracy theories promoted by Han Clothing Movement participants as explanations for the elusive nature of their ideals. According to movement enthusiasts, the formerly powerful Manchus who ruled over China in the Qing Dynasty continues to exercise considerable power in the present, and is dedicated to realizing nothing less than the extermination of the Han and the destruction of China. These paranoid theories, in my analysis, shed light upon the problematic relationship between national imaginings and national reality, as well as between politics as a real process and identity as an imagined essence. Chapter 7, entitled “Producing Purity: The Image of the Traditional Woman,” analyzes the sole acknowledged split within the homogenizing image of the Han Clothing Movement: the distinction between male and female. This distinction produces diverging ideal gender roles, forcing women into outdated images of purity, chastity, and loyalty, while rationalizing misogynistic male fantasies as “culture” and “tradition.” I proceed to analyze the repercussions of the Han Clothing Movement’s normalizing vision of Han-ness and Chineseness for its future as a movement, arguing that its solutions to the dilemmas of the present can only, in the end, generate further dilemmas. Finally, in the conclusion, I draw upon the analytical framework developed through my ethnography of the Han Clothing Movement to interpret a series of distinct yet related neo-traditionalisms and nationalisms in contemporary China: traditional education, Confucian constitutionalism, New Leftism, and the construction of new “old towns.” This conclusion provides a basis for reflecting upon the Han Clothing Movement as one example of broader trends in contemporary Chinese society, striving to realize identity through an imaginary image, and seeking the true path of the future in an imagined past.

**Part I:**  
**The Imaginary Institution of China**

## Chapter I

### **Imaginary Communities: Dialectics of Fantasy and Failure in Nationalist Identification**

How is the nation, as an imagined community, imagined? Where and how do the passions that are characteristic of nationalism emerge, and how are they sustained? And what are the political, social, and personal effects of these imaginings? These questions, which frame the analyses that follow, brought me to Gulou Square in the center of Nanjing on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The Opening Ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which had been a persistent and indeed unavoidable topic of conversation over the previous seven years, were to begin in just a few short minutes. Amidst this excitement, I had one seemingly simple research goal: to continue this seven-year conversation by watching and discussing the Opening Ceremonies with a group of fellow viewers, considering how this national event held a thousand kilometers away in Beijing was experienced from a distance with carefully constructed and imagined intimacy. Located directly in the center of Nanjing, and overshadowed by an impressive billboard-size television screen seemingly designed for such mega-events, Gulou Square appeared to be an ideal choice for the evening. Reassuringly, I found a group of at least four hundred residents already assembled on the square when I arrived at 8:00pm, viewing a video from the municipal propaganda bureau about the importance of being a “civilized citizen of Nanjing.” I found a space to stand amongst the crowd, and awaited the auspicious moment towards which massive countdown clocks across the nation had been counting eagerly for years: 8:08pm, on the eighth day of the eighth month of 2008.

Everything seemed in place for a “hot and noisy” (熱鬧) evening. Yet when 8:08pm arrived, the same propaganda video continued playing in a loop on the screen before us, with its



peculiar juxtapositions of schoolchildren with red scarves, soldiers in uniform and white doves flying into the sky. Guessing that there may have been a slight delay to the start of this important broadcast, I continued glancing upwards along with the hundreds of others gathered around me. But by 8:10pm, some fellow viewers had begun to interrogate the dozens of policemen accompanying us in the square. “The opening ceremonies aren’t going to be broadcast here,” replied one policeman within earshot, adding that we should “go home to watch them.” This appeared to be the official response, as I heard one policeman after another repeat this mantra in the minutes that followed. After years of rising expectations, continually prompted on the evening news and countless melodramatic television specials, a spontaneous and energetic crowd waiting to experience together the long-heralded realization of this century-long dream of the Chinese people (cf. Xu 2008) was now being told to disperse and preferably view the opening ceremonies in the privacy of their own homes.

Seven years prior to that night, on the evening of July 13<sup>th</sup> and early morning of July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2001, people had also come out onto the streets of Nanjing, celebrating the International Olympic Committee’s decision to award the 2008 Olympics to the city of Beijing. From friends to taxi drivers to waitresses to bartenders, everyone whom I encountered in the hours and even days after the announcement asked “did you hear,” with a smile on their faces. Cars honked their horns in celebration. Televisions lit up in restaurants and bars across the city with images of celebrations in the capital and extensive commentaries on the already certain splendor that would be Beijing 2008. Traversing both geographical and temporal distance, citizens envisioned themselves as having an essential part to play in this coming grandeur, asserting confidently that “I’ll be going to Beijing in 2008.” And seemingly unsatisfied with the banal present in which we

were located at the time, many reminded me that whatever I was doing, I needed to come back to China that summer.

I did indeed return in 2008, precisely to research this event for which expectations had been so high for so long. Yet the expectations surrounding the “People’s Olympics” (人民奧運), carefully cultivated through seven years of nationalist hype (cf. Price and Dayan 2008), were quickly descending into disappointing farce just a few minutes into this purportedly historical moment of national revitalization, as the people of the nation, rhetorically placed at the center of this celebration, were told in reality to step aside and stay at home. One middle-aged woman with a child expressed her frustration to a nearby policeman, appropriating the official narratives that had saturated society to highlight the absurdity of the present situation. “Today, the Olympics are finally opening in Beijing, and the whole world is watching. We also just want to watch. It is unreasonable not to broadcast this important event in our nation’s history.” Pointing towards me as an external observer before whom national face had to be maintained, she said “and look, there’s even a foreigner here.” The policeman responded quietly, “these are orders from above (上部規定的),” as he dismissively waved us away. Exiled from the city’s central square, we soon found ourselves crammed together watching the Opening Ceremonies in a McDonald’s, which was the only public space in which this central moment in the nation’s history was broadcast. As I watched the reliably grandiose and melodramatic portrayal of “five millennia of Chinese tradition,” extending from massive scrolls representing the invention of paper, to *guqin* and calligraphy representing the development of the arts, to Zheng He’s boat representing the invention and application of the compass, I noted that the crowd’s response to the opening ceremonies was mixed: viewers characterized the images before them as alternately

interesting, boring, too wasteful, too long, too elaborate, clearly designed for “foreigners,” and “not quite what I expected.”

“Not quite what I expected.” This description, which I heard a number of times that evening, at first appears quite unremarkable. However, this statement in fact highlights a central tension of the national experience: a tension between unbounded expectations and inherently limited experience. The nationalist experience embodied in the Beijing Olympic narrative relies upon the continued inflation of expectations, an inflation that was taken to extremes in this densely concentrated national drama, variously heralded as the realization of the longstanding dreams of the Chinese people, redemption from a century of humiliation, and the reemergence of China as a major power on the world stage. Such claims, as I discovered that night in McDonald’s chewing on French fries and observing the ceremonies on a distant and slightly blurry television on the wall, were far easier to believe in the years of expectation prior to the event than in the moment of their expected enactment. Although the power and passion of the “People’s Games” (人民奧運) could only come from the people, the ideal image of the Games and of “China” was premised precisely upon the elimination of interruptions from real people, with the result, naturally, that the people were disappointed. Thus while the slogan of the Beijing Olympics embodied the unifying ideal of “one world, one dream” (同一個世界同一個夢想), the experience of the Games on the ground exposed a fundamental fissure between this “one dream” and our “one world,” or, as I argue below, an irresolvable split and tension between ideality and experiential reality which both structure and reproduce the national experience. This study aims to illuminate these elementary structures of fantasy and experience, producing the nation as a never complete and thus perpetually enthralling process.

## I. The Elementary Structures of Nationalism: The Nation as Fantasy

... it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (1967 [1872]:52)

The moments described above, while unexpected at first, in fact illuminate a particular logic of nationalist imaginaries: a logic which is frequently on display in practice, yet which has been repeatedly overlooked in analyses. Scholarship on nationalism in recent decades commonly describes nations as “imagined communities,” based upon Benedict Anderson’s highly influential eponymous volume, in which Anderson famously proposes a redefinition of the nation “in an anthropological spirit” as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 1991:5-6). Yet if a nation is an imagined community, how is this community imagined?

According to Anderson’s analysis, the process of imagining is intertwined with the rise of “print capitalism,” referring to the mass circulation of novels and particularly newspapers, otherwise known as one-day best-sellers (Anderson 1991). The simultaneity of space and time expressed in these media, as shown in the examples of a newspaper’s front page (Anderson 1991:33) or a novel’s fictional Manila dinner party (Anderson 1991:26-27), then produces a sense of “homogeneous, empty time” (Anderson 1991:33) which characterizes national thinking. The homogeneous time generated through these media is then reproduced on a daily basis through consumers’ “mass ceremony” of reading newspapers, in which, according to Anderson, “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of

whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 1991:35). Anderson’s analysis of the nation envisions groups engaged in daily experiences of commonality, brought about by shifts in capitalist production, which create a sense of homogeneous, empty time: this conventionally materialist interpretation thus envisions an imagined community produced through transformations of the infrastructure affecting the superstructure.

As revealing and compelling as this analysis may be, one is nevertheless left to wonder whether national experience is really quite so bland. Is “homogeneous, empty time” the real cornerstone of national identification, which fans the flames of nationalism the world over? Is the act of reading national media simply a mundane ceremony of commonality derived from industrial transformations and devoid of imaginaries or underlying sensations and feelings (cf. Latour and Lépinay 2009:20)? As is often the case with influential academic theories, many critiques and expansions of Anderson’s framework have been developed in recent decades. This is to be expected: such a proliferation of critiques does not necessarily indicate that Anderson’s theory is inaccurate, but rather that it provides a compelling perspective on the phenomenon of nationalism, albeit perhaps incomplete. Amidst this ever expanding sea of critique, none is more poignant than Jonathan Rée’s memorable observation in his article “Internationality” that “it is surely only the coolest of nationalists who will pride themselves on belonging to a nation of newspaper readers” (Rée 1992:4). Anderson’s theory, which begins from the passions of nationalism, does not fully account for these passions: nationalism is indeed a daily phenomenon (Billig 1995), but it is not as a result necessarily so banal as Anderson’s theory would suggest.

An analytical framework structured around repetitive ceremonies and empty calendrical time misrepresents the human relationship to imagined communities as ironically lacking in

imagination, while at the same time misrepresenting fundamental characteristics of human interactions with media and the calendar. First, the act of reading a newspaper is not primarily a “ceremony,” but more importantly a conduit for receiving information on topics of interest and personal investment: an interaction between media and the mind. It is then not so much a ritualized imagining of a community of fellow readers as a structuring of this community around common events, themes, and concerns. Second, in contrast to the notion of “empty calendrical time,” we would be well-advised to remember that calendars are not empty grids of equal dates, but rather textured grids featuring peaks. Such peaks include annual holidays, such as Thanksgiving, in which one recounts and even reenacts American national mythologies, or major historical moments, such as centennials or bicentennials, in which the representation of national identity becomes a matter of primary importance (Spillman 1997), thus making modern calendrical time anything but empty and monotonous. Third, just as media stories provide stimuli to think, reflect, and imagine, calendars also provide space upon which their owners can write, filling in empty blocks of space with their own content, whether burdensome or enjoyable: two types of content which are also primary in the national experience. Such nuances of affective experience, however, are overlooked in Anderson’s rigidly materialist analytical framework, wherein the imagined nationalist superstructure all too predictably reflects the emerging print capitalist base.

To overcome such omissions and develop a framework better suited to the imaginings and intensities of the imagined community, Rée usefully proposes redirecting the study of nationalism towards the field of the Lacanian imaginary, the locus of fantasy, to seek out the “wild longings and weird fantasies” therein (Rée 1992:4). Even a quick glance into such a

nationalist imaginary<sup>1</sup> reveals, unsurprisingly, that there is no nation in the world organized around mundane ideas or represented through bland imagery; instead, glorious histories, heroic mythical figures, romanticized national characteristics, grand ideals, redemption and revenge for past injustices, and an ideal national order (cf. Hage 1998) are the necessary ingredients for any nation, and constitute the core of any nationalist imaginary.<sup>2</sup> Rather than a relationship to fellow citizens generated through a daily ritual, then, imagined communities are produced through identifications with shared or contested but always imposing visions of what makes “us” who we are. And rather than the “homogeneous, empty time” portrayed as a central characteristic of the national experience, these identifications are structured around an often romanticized past and a promising future, marked in the present by cyclical peaks of excitement embodied in rituals of celebration: national days, national spectacles, historical commemorations, and countdowns to future accomplishments. Such attention to the imaginary and affect-laden nature of imagined communities, highlighting the zealous investments, wild fantasies, and obsessive identifications structured around a reliably grandiose national symbolic chain, then brings us closer to accounting for the unrelenting passion of the nation form: the passion from which Anderson’s analyses famously begin (Anderson 1991:7), yet which his subsequent analyses unfortunately overlook.

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<sup>1</sup> By using the terms “national imaginary” and the “imaginary institution of China,” I of course do not intend to argue that nations are not real or do not have real-world effects. From another perspective, however, noting that nations have very real-world effects does not preclude the analysis of fundamentally imaginary projections, emotional attachments, and affective investments in nationalism and processes of national identification. I employ the notion of the imaginary here in a Lacanian sense derived from his studies of the mirror stage, wherein the imaginary refers to a fantastic image of stability and wholeness towards which subjects (egos) perpetually strive but remain unable to attain in reality. Such an imaginary relationship, as the primary structure of fantasy, has powerful real-world effects; and as an elementary structure of nationalism as analyzed in this chapter, such a national imaginary illuminates in my analysis the power of nationalism and national identity.

<sup>2</sup> By limiting itself to examining imaginings across the equally imaginary East-West binary, the always popular anti-Orientalist mode of critique, attentive to the misreading, imaginings, and mystifications of “the other,” fundamentally overlooks the fact that similar imaginings and mystifications exist in relation to the community of which one is a part.

Although fantasy is not part of Anderson's theoretical toolbox in his discussion of imagined communities, its presence can nevertheless be detected in his examples, such that we might fruitfully reconsider his history of nationalism through the vantage point of desire. Explaining the emergence of national independence movements in the Americas in his chapter "Creole Pioneers," Anderson focuses upon the frustrations created for "creoles" born of Spanish migrants in the new territories overseas. Recounting the exclusion of such "fellow-Europeans" born abroad from positions of official importance not only in the metropole of Spain but even in neighboring colonies, Anderson proposes that a sense of fellowship emerged amongst those excluded by right of their subordination resulting from the "shared fatality of trans-Atlantic birth" (Anderson 1991:57-58). This irrational exclusion and the thwarted desires and aspirations that it produced in turn generated a logic that eventually provided the foundation for nationhood: for if the Creole born in the Americas was not a true Spaniard and was thus blocked from occupational passage to the metropole, then, the Creole pondered, the Spaniard born in Spain was also not a true American (Anderson 1991:58). Accordingly, if the Spaniard has Spain, then the Creole should have his or her own home, a space in which he or she would be free from exclusion, a condition to be reserved for others, and hence better able to realize his or her aspirations, ideal life, or indeed, fantasies. The nation was thus from its inception in these elementary national structures a space of fantastic imaginings, an imaginarily secure sphere of one's own (Sloterdijk 2011) in which one would be able to realize one's aspirations. But most importantly in cultural-historical terms, as Anderson notes, the creoles engaged in this imagining possessed the political, cultural, and military means to enact this fantasy, leading to the establishment of the nation as a social institution founded in and enacting desire. Nations are then externalizations of personal desires that have become institutionalized and are then in turn



internalized (Berger and Luckmann 1966), generating a dialectical chain of ideas of wholeness, stability, and grandeur to construct an imaginary community which is always greater than oneself, yet which also includes and embraces oneself.

This social institution has since spread across the world as a particularly resonant mode of structuring identifications and aspirations. On the other side of the globe, the empire-turned-nation of China has been organized over the past century around a number of diverging aspirations and fantasies expressed through the nation form, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. For now, it is worth noting the reliably grandiose nature of the fantasies that have emerged within this national context in the past hundred years: from New Culture to New Life, to Liberation, to a Great Leap Forward, to a Cultural Revolution, to stability and development, to reunifying the motherland, to a century-long Olympic dream, to the awakening of a dragon, to the more recent focus upon five millennia of culture and tradition and the rise of a new great power, to, most recently, Xi Jinping's articulation of the China Dream (中國夢) (Economist 2013). In the present, reading a state-run newspaper, viewing a news website, or watching television news in China is by no means a mundane ritual, despite its predictability: one opens onto rapidly rising skyscrapers, skyrocketing GDP figures, speeding trains, space launches, smiling children, reports on drives to eliminate corruption and realize a "civilized citizenry," chest thumping editorials claiming to represent the "voice of China" (Times 2011) and of course countdowns to the next national mega-event, wrapped in romanticized discourses of "my country" (我國),<sup>3</sup> five millennia of culture and tradition, unity, stability, harmony, development, rise, and inevitable celebration. Expanding upon studies which revealingly analyze motivations

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<sup>3</sup> Although rendered here as "my country," the Chinese term *woguo* could also be translated as "our country," blurring the lines of possession between the self, fellow compatriots, and the nation itself.

of Chinese nationalism and national identity in the nation's relationship to such significant others as the United States, Taiwan, and Japan (Gries 2004; Liu 2006; Shambaugh 1991), these internal images of the national self and national mission bring our attention to the equally important binary relationship between citizens and another significant other: the national imaginary itself.

Therefore, despite my reservations regarding aspects of Anderson's analytical framework, his attention to the role of media is important for any analysis of imaginary communities and their national symbolic chains. And Ziad Fahmy's recent articulation of "media capitalism" as an expansion of this framework beyond print media (Fahmy 2011) helps to develop an overall view of the construction of the image of China, wherein the unique "Chinese characteristics" of the Chinese media produce a national-symbolic chain all too reliably drenched in splendor. In the reception of this national propaganda, the vision of the ironic and detached consumer who believes nothing in the state media beyond the date and the weather report is just as misplaced as the vision of the naïve consumer who simply believes and internalizes everything presented to him or her. Rather, a more accurate perspective can be found between these two untenable options through the vantage point of imaginary communities and collective fantasies, wherein the state media is neither a producer of reality nor an illegitimate fraud, but rather a central player in producing national imaginaries and shaping aspirations, expectations, and emotions towards the nation and one's place therein, even if one's experience fails to correspond to their portrayals.

The question of experience reminds us that although the aforementioned aspirations and fantasies are the primary effect of the media and its national symbolic chain, they remain at the same time its primary dilemma. For after years of reports and grandiose official declarations

about the splendor-to-be in the coming Olympic Games, these Games appeared, on the one hand, destined to be monumental, and on the other hand, immediately and intimately related to oneself. The decision on that August 2008 evening to step out into Nanjing's central square to view the Olympic Games in an expected moment of glorious collective effervescence demonstrates the ways in which the national symbolic chain manages to capture citizens' imaginations, and even intertwines the self with these imaginaries. Yet at the same time, the exclusionary experience which resulted from this decision for eager viewers in Nanjing demonstrates how these grandiose imaginings and promises unavoidably undermine themselves in practice.

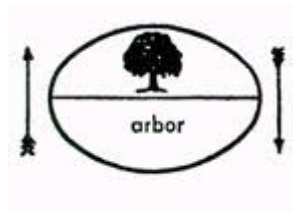
## **II. The Elementary Structures of Nationalism: The Nation as Experience**

The "creoles" featured prominently in Anderson's history of nationalism eventually succeeded in realizing their national dream, hoping to move beyond the exclusion to which they had been subjected by their relatives in the metropole. Yet despite their substantive contributions to the development of the idea of the nation as a form of social organization, the history that followed in the newly established nations reminds us that not all was well in their new homes. For even after the emergence of the nation as a mode of organization and the seeming reassurance of a proper and secure home of one's own for oneself and one's descendants, boundaries and limits to what one can achieve naturally remain plentiful, as do sources of social contention, disharmony, exploitation, violence, and repression. This inevitable twist of fate highlights the central contradiction of nations as imaginary communities: although such communities may be boundless in their imaginings, they inevitably have their limits in reality (Plessner 1999), such that their fantasies remains unattainable.

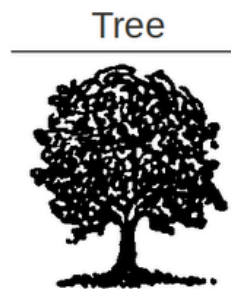
In contrast to the expansive grandeur of nationalist imaginaries described in the previous section, the second elementary structure of nationalism, examined in this section, is the limiting banality of everyday national experience. We must remember that while nations are imagined, they are also lived; while nations are ideas, they are also geographic spaces; while nations are thought as grandiose and always fulfilling fantasies seemingly detached from the mundane nature of everyday life, they are also experienced as an always considerably less fulfilling reality in which one lives one's mundane daily life. The organization of nations around such wonderful ideas as liberty, fraternity, equality, dignity, tradition, unity, or communism with its Eden-like image of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," virtually guarantees that the experience of national reality will be a disappointment: while these national imaginaries are always greater than the self and thus fulfill the self, they are also always greater than the nation-space itself and one's existence therein. If the national imaginary is expressive of a fantastic national pleasure principle which constantly raises our hopes beyond ourselves, the material world and its daily experience produce an equally powerful national reality principle which constantly fails to correspond to these hopes and brings them back down to earth. Thus, despite my preceding critique of the mundane portrayal of nationalism in Anderson's analytical framework for overlooking the imaginary nature of the imagined community, from another perspective his attention to the mundane reveals the actual substance of the national experience, which all too often stands in stark contrast to its imaginary aspirations: although national ideals are indeed about far more than mundane rituals and homogeneous, empty time, our life experience is in fact often characterized by precisely such mundane rituals and homogeneous, empty time.

Therefore, although I have noted in the preceding section the significance of fantastic imaginaries in structuring the idea of the nation and constituting its appeal, I have no intention of providing a reductionist postmodern analysis in which “signifiers” and “language games” shape or in the last instance determine the world: if, after all, this were to be the case, the world would undoubtedly be a far more pleasant place than it is. Instead, I argue that while national imaginaries play an essential role in shaping one’s thinking about the world, this world as experience inevitably fails to correspond to these imaginaries. Living in a nation is thus an experience in which one lives within national imaginaries, in that they contribute to one’s sense of self, while also living outside of national imaginaries, in that the complexity, uncertainty, and dilemmas of one’s lived experience never in fact correspond to these romanticized ideals. The fantasies expressed through the imagined community can only be maintained in and as the imaginary, blocked from crossing over into the actual experiential environment (cf. Luhmann 2012b).

This experiential gap corresponds to the theorization of desire proposed by analysts of the Lacanian School, which combines Ferdinand de Saussure’s parsing of the signifier and the signified with the psychodynamics of Freudian theory to reinterpret desire as a perpetually unrealized aspiration thwarted by a founding fissure. Nearly a century ago, Saussure refuted the widespread assumption of an unproblematic relationship between a word and the thing to which it refers by articulating the distinction between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 1986:66). This structural distinction within language was memorably represented through the graph shown below, wherein the signified and the signifier are separated and juxtaposed:



Jacques Lacan proceeded to take this logic a step further in his analysis of the human relationship to language and fantasy. Beyond noting the distinction between the signifier and the signified, Lacan importantly highlights the manner in which the signifying chain, existing as it does prior to any individual's entry into this chain, hovers over the signified and indeed over society in general, essentially taking on a life of its own (Lacan 2006). This relationship is represented in his inversion of Saussure's tree graph, locating the signifier itself above the signified (Fink 2004:81; Lacan 2006:416).



The bar between the two items no longer serves only to highlight a previously overlooked distinction, but even more importantly to represent a hierarchy and a fundamentally impassable barrier (Lacan 1978:141, 206-207; Lacan 2006:416). In Lacan's analysis, series of signifiers become part of a stable chain of signification which precedes individuals, such that humans are required to recognize, imagine, and express themselves through this chain. At the same time, although the use of this chain is premised upon the idea of identity, a complete correspondence between the self (or the world) and this symbolic chain is never able to be realized. The basic

motivation of desire, then, is the search for an always unattainable wholeness precluded by this founding division.

Accordingly, the images and signifiers surrounding the idea of the nation constitute a quite stable signifying chain of imagining, fusing the imaginary and the symbolic, whose representations precede residents and structure their self-understanding, presenting an image of coherent wholeness often rendered as “culture,” “tradition,” or “national characteristics.” Residents born into this national space inherit and actively invest themselves in these ideas as if they were entirely natural and indeed their very own, despite the fact that they are not. In one example of such a national symbolic chain, state media images of China may portray rapidly rising skyscrapers, skyrocketing GDP figures, reports on drives to eliminate corruption, and countdowns to the next national mega-event; however, a citizen in actual experience is equally likely to face such growing challenges as rising living costs and housing prices, the continual expansion of corruption throughout society, and as described at the start of this chapter, exclusion from illusorily inclusive national milestones. As such, in a variation on Saussure and Lacan’s graphs, I propose that the relationship between national ideas and lived reality could be represented as:

**National ideal**  
**Lived reality**

This graph signifies the dual identity of nations as, on the one hand, ideas or fantasies, and on the other hand, actual spaces in which people live on a daily basis, a contradictory duality that makes “the nation” unique both as a signifier and as an experience. For while people envision themselves as living within this national signifier, with all of the wild and fantastic associations that have accompanied it from its inception, they at the same time live in an actual space thus

labeled that nevertheless fails to correspond to the images present within this signifying chain, generating an alienating tension between image and substance at the core of nationalist experience, as well as an accompanying fantasy of fusion (Castoriadis 1987:94), or identity.

The tension of this fantasy, which allows nations to both carry our greatest hopes and bear our greatest disappointments, can be seen in the events of August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from which this chapter began. The awe-inspiring narrative of national rejuvenation through the realization of a century-long Olympic dream, combined with the seemingly all-inclusive vision of a “People’s Olympics,” produced a uniquely grandiose national symbolic chain which structured expectations in the years preceding 2008. The dispersal of countdown clocks to public squares across the nation embodied this phenomenon: these clocks not only served as a daily prompt and redistributed meaning across national space, but also restructured the experience of time itself around this coming event in the preceding years. The admittedly homogeneous and empty progression of hours from dawn to dusk each day was replaced by national time, characterized by a constantly shrinking distance from a seemingly sacred moment of unity for the imaginary community. It was in search of this meaning and its realization that Nanjing residents, located a thousand kilometers south of the center of this moment in Beijing, decided to step out into the city’s central square to bask in community and the excitement of August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Yet the expectations of this moment, documented above, were such that this moment could never in fact arrive. Great expectations lead only to great disappointments: and when an event is promoted as a culminating symbol of national revitalization, almost anything that happens in reality is highly likely to disappoint. In his analysis of the contradictions inherent in our experience of the world, Arthur Schopenhauer memorably recounts the tale of a certain



Raymond Lull, “who had long wooed a beautiful woman, was at last admitted to her chamber, and was looking forward to the fulfillment of all his desires, when, opening her dress, she showed him her bosom terribly eaten away with cancer” (Schopenhauer 1966:394). Such a collective sense that “no, that’s not it” (Stavrakakis 1999:45), felt in the vague critiques of the opening ceremonies, the paranoid security measures smothering people’s participation in and viewing of the expected People’s Olympics, and the generally disappointing nature of experience then expresses this fundamental dilemma of the imaginary community, caught between overwhelming images and underwhelming experiences.

The nation is thus both more and less than itself. Theodor Adorno’s analysis of the contradictions inherent within the concept of freedom, part of his critique of what he calls identity thinking, is instructive for considering the human relationship to the national symbolic chain:

Emphatically conceived, the judgment that a man is free refers to the concept of freedom; but this concept in turn is more than is predicated of the man, and by other definitions the man is more than the concept of his freedom... The concept of freedom lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. It is not what it says, then. But because it must always be also the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers. Such confrontation forces it to contradict itself (Adorno 1973:150-151).

In a similar sense, one might say that the nation is not what “it” says (through its national symbolic chain, composed of people’s communications about and imaginings of “the nation”), and is similarly forced to perpetually contradict itself in practice. The imagined associations surrounding the concept of the nation, in all of their grandiosity, are more than the experience of the national space itself; and the nation as experience is more than its associations, as many of the unpleasant and disheartening real-world phenomena that occur within this space are excluded quite reliably from its image. The nation as a space and experience is then both far more and far

less than its imaginings and representations, a disjointed schema perpetuating a gap “between what things claim to be and what they are” (Adorno 1973:150). Yet it is precisely through this gap, insofar as “nonidentity is the secret telos of identification” (Adorno 1973:149), that the idea of the nation is reproduced and reinvested as an object of identification and longing.

### **III. The Elementary Structures of Nationalism: The Nation as a Paradoxical System**

Life is a search for the impossible via the useless.

-Gabriel Tarde (Sloterdijk 2012:57)

Insofar as the gap between imagining and experience is the central tension of nationalism, it is also its driving force. For when one wants to believe in an entity and its power, for whatever reason, even counter-evidence can be transformed into an affirmation and a reinvestment in the sanctity of this power. Such a self-reproducing pattern can be seen in the longstanding tradition of theodicy, which was founded in the gap between the imagining of a just, loving, and all-powerful god and the actual experience of the world over which this god purportedly reigned: a world always containing what can only be characterized as ungodly elements. While this gap has throughout the centuries raised unavoidable questions about god’s justness, love, and power, the inquiries that it produced reliably assumed that the only possible answer was to be found in the source of the original question, as demonstrated by the fact that theodicy literally means “to justify god” (*theos dike*). The dilemmas of experience producing doubts about the image of a loving god were then to be read as anomalies so as to reaffirm the imagining of a loving god, who naturally brought much-needed reassurance amidst these very dilemmas of experience

(Luhmann 1998:54) by providing a sacred canopy of meaning (Berger 1967); the result was a self-reproducing thought system in which counter-evidence to imaginings could only plausibly reproduce and reinforce these imaginings. Since the downfall of god as the central subject of history and the subsequent rise of the nation, a national theodicy or perhaps a “natiody” has similarly emerged from the gap between the heavenly imagining of the nation and the actual experience of this national space: a space which also inevitably contains highly discordant elements.

Despite their appeal, as emphasized above, national narratives do not determine reality; yet despite their fundamental unreality, they continue to have an inherent appeal. In fact, I argue that it is precisely in their unreality that their appeal lies: the nation is a sacred form spread over a profane world. As in the practice of theodicy, natiody pushes back against the evidence, continually provided by the experiential reality of this profane world, of the unreliability of the fulfilling yet always unfulfilled national fantasy, reinterpreting continued disappointments, misfortunes, and injustices as anomalies that are not in fact properly part of the nation, notwithstanding their existence within the realm represented as national space. The common end goal of both theodicy and natiody is then to reaffirm an experientially untenable ideal, against all evidence, out of a desire to continue to believe: by finding the solution within the original source of the dilemma, the paradox is perpetuated, and a perpetually inconclusive and unstable process is able to be misrepresented as a natural essence (cf. Amselle 2010).

The elementary structures of the nation, combining both fantasy and experience, then form a simultaneously self-deconstructing and self-reproducing paradoxical system driven by affect and desire and founded upon its own impossibility. This system is perpetuated, on the one

hand, through the national imaginary, which is constantly expanding and intensifying in its contradictory relationship with reality, and on the other hand, through the individual, for whom the imaginary community is simultaneously supplement and lack. The relationship between the two is complex, troubled, and mutually reinforcing. Although many of us, in the process of becoming adults, submit to the fact that we will never become President or succeed as a professional athlete or rock star, nations as instituted systems of imaginings are not bound by the same humility: fantasy is, after all, their very foundation. As a medium of desire, the nation is unique by right of the sheer size of its promises and the hopes and investments that it creates, attaining a magnitude that is comparable only to the related phenomena of religious mythologies (cf. Kapferer 1988) and political doctrines (Reich 1970). And thus, whereas it would appear most logical that the fulfillment of official ideals or goals would be central to the national project, if the foregoing argument has proven anything decisively, it should be that the national experience is anything but logical;<sup>4</sup> instead, it is an affect-laden and desire-based “community of feeling” (cf. Berezin 1997:27-30) founded upon and fueled by imagining, passions, and even, unexpectedly, disappointment. Within this systematization of affective arousal, the barrier between ideals and existence remains perpetually unable to be crossed; yet this does not stop one from trying. In fact, it is precisely this irresolvable contradiction, namely the “antagonism between a tendency towards reality and towards illusion” (Plessner 1999:115) or a will to illusion (Sloterdijk 1989) which drives and deepens the continued passionate attachment to this community among its members: the greater the distance between ideals and reality, the more that one becomes invested in these ideals as sources of support, confidence, and fulfillment. Insofar as the imaginary

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar discussion of the constitutive role of irrationality in economics, see Bruno Latour and Vincent Antonin Lepinay’s The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s Economic Anthropology (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

community exists only in the minds of individuals, while at the same time relying for its appeal upon the imaginary transcendence of the environment in which these individuals actually live, it is never to be found in individual experience. Yet the grandiosity of the national symbolic system produces investments which are only reaffirmed, strengthened, and expanded through the fundamental discordance of the system as a whole, meaning that even in its own failure, the imaginary community continues to live on affectively as a fantastic supplement to its own non-realization.

Nations are then modes of collective organization through which people envision goals, but do not realize them (Luhmann 1998:105): the output of this national system, namely its inevitable failure to live up to its imaginings, then functions in turn as its input (Luhmann 1995), driving its perpetuation. The lack of experiential fulfillment from essential national images constitutes at once the core contradiction and the driving force of nationalist sentiment, resulting in a reinvestment in and growing proliferation of these images: rising skyscrapers, speeding trains, space launches, smiling children, mega-events, and the “civilized citizenry” presented to us that August evening are simultaneously constituted as a desire, a disappointing lack, and an imaginary supplement. One is then just as likely to hear an enthusiastic nationalist complain about his or her nation (“things aren’t going in the right direction”) as celebrate his or her nation: either way, powerful sentiments and imaginings are certain to be present. These controlling sentiments illuminate Jonathan Rée’s comment that although one might like to think that a nation belongs to oneself, as suggested by the stock phrase “my nation” (or in Chinese, 我國), it would in fact be far more accurate to describe oneself as belonging to one’s nation (Rée 1993:51): as much as one possesses nationality, the ideas and patriotic duties associated with this identity can

similarly possess oneself, capturing one's emotions in an affective cycle of imaginings, experiential disjunctions, and further imaginings, such that one is always seeking a chance to strive yet again towards its perpetually elusive realization.

After the articulation of the imagined community of the nation through the development of the printing press, it has been these sentiments which have kept these printing presses, and the affective attachments articulated and distributed therein, in operation. The aforementioned unshakeable sense of "that's not it" (cf. Stavrakakis 1999:45) inevitably leads the invested individual to the persistent question "where is it?" The only possible answer to this question is the further production of imaginings and investments, and the resulting cultural products are the topic of this study.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have proposed a new approach to analyzing and understanding the nationalist experience, moving beyond the standard discussion of nations as imagined communities to an examination of imaginary communities as expressions and objects of desire. This shift seeks to account for the passions and investments that are central to national identification by considering the nation as primarily a vehicle of fantasy, through which individuals come to seek collective fulfillment and transcendence from the mundane and often imperfect nature of their personal lives. Yet besides highlighting the overlooked imagining that constitutes the imagined community, this line of analysis further highlights the imaginary community's fundamentally dual nature: the nation is experienced both as an imaginary space of

seemingly limitless possibilities and as a space of mundane and inherently limited daily experience. This central contradiction of nationalism, namely, the failure of experience to correspond to national fantasy, does not however detract from the passionate attachments to the national ideal, but instead only further reinforces them as a perpetually elusive but also perpetually appealing goal. The result is a continually self-deconstructing yet also self-reproducing system, wherein the disappointment resulting from the heightened expectations promoted by the nationalist imaginary results in a reinvestment in and intensification of this nationalist imaginary, towards the goal of making this imaginary real.

Revitalizing the “real China” was a point of constant fascination and longing for participants in the Han Clothing Movement. The preceding analyses of the structures and experience of nationalism, however, should raise serious doubts about any simplistic vision of the real China. Where exactly would this real China be located? In the imaginings which structure and drive the national experience? Or in the experiences which ever so reliably contrast with these imaginings? Or perhaps, rather, in the emotional moments and affective tensions that are produced in between? The latter is where one might locate the experience of the 2008 Olympics from which this chapter began, as well as the Han Clothing Movement itself, as shall be discussed in more detail in the second part of this study. Yet both of these manifestations of the central contradiction and driving force of nationalism were only part of a much longer and even more unruly cycle of nationalist imaginings and experience extending over the past century, attempting to address the same quandaries which have followed national thinkers, dreamers, and subjects since the origins of the modern Chinese nation. The next chapter traces these tensions within the national experience over the past century to rediscover an ever-changing yet self-reproducing affective system conventionally known as “China.”

## Chapter II

### **Between Heaven and Earth: Cycles of Nationalist Imagining and Experience in Modern China**

You love the motherland, but does the motherland love you?

-Quotation from the film *Bitter Love (Ku lian)*  
(1980)

This chapter applies the preceding analytical framework of self-reproducing imaginary communities to the case of modern China. Beginning from the disintegration of the imperial order in the late Qing, I argue that a series of self-labeled “awakenings” in the history of modern China have in fact been attempts to recapture lost dreams of a heaven that in fact never existed. A number of important cases in recent history, from the revolutionary imaginings of Zou Rong to the proletarian nationalism of the Maoist era, are reexamined in light of the fantastic but fundamentally split nature of the nation, tracing a dialectic of national imaginings and failure which over the course of the twentieth century fueled the imaginary community’s acceleration toward ever more extreme paths. The commonplace interpretation of China’s reform era as transitioning from Maoism to nationalism is furthermore reconsidered, suggesting instead a transition from a politics of urgency to a politics of gradualism that has disenchanted the nation’s present. What is commonly labeled as rising nationalism is instead a response to this partial disenchantment, leading to spontaneous urges for an idealized and thus unreal vision of the “real China” in the immediate present. It is within this tense and uncertain historical moment of disenchantment and determined re-enchantment that the Han Clothing Movement is located, revitalizing not so much a longstanding national tradition as a longstanding tradition of nationalist imagining.



## **I. Awakening and Dreaming: The Expulsion from *Tianxia***

The notion of awakening, a central theme of nationalist ideology (Gellner 1983:48), has played a particularly prominent role in the history of the Chinese nation over the past century (cf. Fitzgerald 1996), extending from the Nationalist Revolution through the 2008 Olympics and beyond. Yet insofar as the nation as imaginary community is analogous to a dream, this notion of national awakening is not only, as Gellner suggests, misrepresentative (Gellner 1983:48), but in fact inherently contradictory. This paradox of awakening to a dream is expressed most clearly in a juxtaposition of statements from two central thinkers of early Chinese nationalism, Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen. Reflecting upon the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 (known in Chinese as the “Jiawu War”), in which a presumed tributary state’s embrace of modern military technologies brought it unexpected victory, Liang Qichao commented that “this war has awakened our nation from a dream of four thousand years (喚起我國四千年之大夢，實則甲午一役始也)” (Shi 2011:3). A few decades after this awakening, in his definitive lectures on the Three Principles of the People, Sun Yat-sen saw a vastly different situation when he commented that “since our subjugation by the Manchus, our four hundred million have been asleep, our ancient morality has been asleep, our ancient learning has been asleep” (qt. in Fitzgerald 1996:2). Placed together, what might seem to be a minor semantic distinction of national description in these two central yet mutually contradictory statements, in fact gives voice to the founding dilemma of nationalism in modern China. Had the coming of modernity finally awakened China from a millennia-old dream of imperial delusion? Or was a China that appeared to have fallen behind in the modern world order caught in an uncharacteristic slumber from which it needed to

be awakened? Considering the fundamentally imaginary nature of the national community, when can one say that a nation is asleep or awake?

The roots of this dilemma of slumber and wakefulness, which remains unresolved a century later, are to be found in the contradictory origins of Chinese nationalism. For China's articulation as an imaginary community in the modern, national sense was contemporaneous with the disintegration of the cosmological order that had structured identification for millennia. Blending religion, politics, and culture into an immensely particularistic universalism, to be part of the Middle Kingdom in the pre-modern era was to be part of civilization itself. The notion of heaven (天) described a supernatural force which ordered and guided the events and affairs of the world (Yang 1961:127). The Emperor, defined as the "son of heaven," was not only given power and legitimacy through the Mandate of Heaven, but was furthermore endowed with the not-so-humble responsibility of enacting the proper rituals in order to perpetuate the cosmic cycle (Zito 1997:150), or, in other words, to keep the world running. As such, his realm extended across the universe proper (天下, all under heaven) (Zhao 2004:41), and the culture that he represented was civilization itself; other variants were derided as "barbaric" and thus in need of conversion. Even external conquerors of this polity, such as the Yuan or the Qing dynasties, were presented in a twist of supreme *ressentiment* as in turn having been conquered by this all-encompassing culturalism, in that upon taking control of the imperial realm, they were understood as having adopted "Chinese ways" (Laitinen 1990:11). One would be hard-pressed to find a seemingly more reassuring and indeed narcissistic system of identification, located within a similarly reassuring and meaningful cosmology that would seem to cover every detail of the world as it was known at the time.

The beauty of this seemingly seamless and illusorily timeless model as viewed from the present, however, relies greatly upon distance. For those who actually lived within this realm, all was naturally not quite so reassuring and charmed; or, all under heaven was likely never as heavenly as we might think. This simple truth is belied by the fact that this now lost ideal was already relying upon another lost ideal, as can be seen in Confucianism's utopian celebration of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou). Such a myth of a "lost state of harmony, unity, and fullness" (Stavrakakis 1999:52) is then not unique to modern China, or indeed to China: in fact, this lost state arguably constitutes a founding principle of all political ideologies. Nevertheless, the importance of this founding myth of the fall from Eden for modern Chinese nationalism cannot be overlooked. For contemporaneous with China's incorporation into the modern world-system in the nineteenth century, this vision of the imaginary community slowly imploded: understandings of the world became more complex, state corruption ran rampant, the son of heaven and the system which surrounded him began to undergo demystification, the much-discussed imperialist incursions divided what came to be thought of as Chinese territory and posed a challenge to a formerly self-justifying view of civilization, producing an irreconcilable gap between the imaginings around which the community was organized and the realities that the community faced. A seemingly well-founded sense of cultural superiority resulted in blindness to the fact that the empire was no longer, if it had in fact ever been, the sole arbiter of civilization, until the point that this fact could no longer be ignored. If modernity is a process of explicating previously un-thought presumptions of existence (Sloterdijk 2009b:50, 60) and of thereby rupturing the self-constructed symbolic shells upon which humans rely (Sloterdijk 2009a:135), then the current official delineation of Chinese history, wherein the beginning of the first Opium

War in the year 1840 marks the beginning of modern history (近代史), could not be more accurate.

Such was the awakening to which Liang Qichao referred in his discussion of China's military defeat by Japan in the late nineteenth century: more of a rude awakening by a jarring alarm clock than by the pleasant and optimistic light of early morning. What Liang characterizes as awakening from a dream was primarily a demystification of the imaginary community; however, when read through the inherently imaginary and fantastic character of national identification, such demystification can also be understood as an anomalous slumber of reality from which the nation must awaken to recapture its dreams. Such a line of thought would bring us back to Sun Yat-sen's aforementioned reflections on national slumber and the need for an as yet unrealized awakening, an idea which propelled aspiring revolutionaries from the late Qing Dynasty onward. Modern nationalism in China was then founded upon this contradictory situation produced through the disintegration of *tianxia*, wherein an awakening's undermining of past dreams served in turn as the framework for new dreams rendered as awakenings: each revolution has in fact been a retrovolution against degradation from an ideal model (Amselle 2010). The widely used framework of a historical shift from culturalism to nationalism, or from "the imperium" (cf. Zito 1998) to "the nation-state," might then be more accurately characterized as a transition from an all-encompassing, isolated, and self-reproducing alienated fantasy to a self-reproducing crisis of perpetually elusive fantasy. The repercussions over the past century for the experience of the nation as an object of affective investment are analyzed in the following sections on (1) the late Qing and Republican eras, (2) the Maoist era, and (3) the present era of "reform and opening."

## II. Revolution and the Republic

What we dream about... is a guide to what we actually will do when we enter the ideal or future world.

-Liang Qichao (qt. in Fitzgerald 1996:63)

The late Qing era in which this crisis emerged developed into a moment of great intellectual foment, structured around reimagining disintegrating visions of community. Thinkers such as Yan Fu reflected upon the question of the era:

We thought that of all the human race none was nobler than we. And then one day from tens and thousands of miles away came island barbarians from beyond the pale, with bird-like language and beastly features, who floated in and pounded on our gates requesting entrance and, when they did not get what they asked for, they attacked our coasts and took captive our officials and even burned our palaces and alarmed our emperor. When this happened, the only reason we did not devour their flesh and sleep on their hides was that we had not the power (qt. in Pusey 1983:50).

Yan's response to this conundrum over the course of his intellectual career showed extreme openness to any type of thinking, from liberalism to Social Darwinism, that could aid in his search for "wealth and power" (Schwartz 1969). Pondering the same questions from a different perspective, restorationists such as Feng Guifen promoted an idea of *tiyong* (体用), which encouraged studying advanced technologies from "the barbarians" in order to defeat these barbarians, all of the while maintaining an essential Chinese core (Zhao 2004:52). Such an approach, in Feng's words, sought to "restore our original strength, redeem ourselves from further humiliations, and maintain the integrity of our vast territory" to establish China as "the leading power of the world" (Hunt 1993:65), or in one scholar's assessment of this affair, to restore an approximate correspondence between reality and the longstanding "Chinese myth of the state, society, and the good life" (Wright 1966:vii). More racially inclined thinkers such as

Zhang Binglin, who wavered throughout his intellectual career between anti-imperialism and anti-Manchuism, proposed that “our country, with a vast territory, a large population, and a flourishing civilization” should be able to follow the example of such “small countries” as Greece and Poland in rebelling against “external” occupation (Laitinen 1990:83). And on the extreme end of the spectrum, the Boxers famously dedicated themselves to martial arts training which purportedly made them impervious to gunfire in an effort to drive out the “foreign devils” and realize national salvation. From Yan Fu’s varied intellectual repertoire to the essentialism of *tiyong* to the mysticism of boxing, the diversity of the response to the disintegration of the prevailing order was united in agreement upon one essential point: the importance of the imaginary community China and the need to recapture that which was perceived as having been lost in the realities of the time. Such romantic yet vague keywords as “national strength,” “vast territory,” “flourishing civilization,” and “national salvation” highlight the at once fantastic yet also elusive nature of this national fantasy in a new world order.

Perhaps no one expressed this dilemma, nor envisioned the radical and even violent responses that it would generate over the next century, more compellingly than scholar and racial-political martyr Zou Rong. Zou’s nationalist tract *Revolutionary Army* (革命先鋒) became a bestseller in the later years of the Qing Dynasty (Laitinen 1990:103), despite having been banned by the authorities for its incendiary portrayal of the Qing’s rulers. Zou’s analysis of the national situation was based in, and never veered far from, a virulent hatred for the “furry and horned” (Tsou 1968:58) “inferior race of nomads” (Tsou 1968:64) ruling China at the time, usually known as the Manchus. Following a lengthy exposition about the downfall of China at

the hands of these barbarians, Zou presents an imaginary vision of China which he perceives as inherently more real than the reality that he faced at the time:

Yet [my] China is capable of embracing the whole world, of shaking and dazzling the entire globe, or surveying benignly the nations from its heights and dominating the five continents. We possess five million square li of land, 400 million indigenous people, over five thousand years of history, and we have had the government of the two emperors and three kings. Our land is situated in the temperate zone. Its inhabitants are naturally sagacious, its products are abundant, it is rich in water resources, all of which are such as are not to be found anywhere else in the world. Of all these our country is the sole possessor (Tsou 1968:81).

This excerpt from a late-Qing nationalist bestseller encapsulates the wonders of the national symbolic chain in one brief paragraph: a seemingly natural flow of consciousness spanning expansive lands, sagacious people, rich resources, lengthy history, grand traditions, heavenly sovereigns, and most importantly the power to “shake and dazzle the entire globe.” Zou’s imagining of “my China” (the original Chinese text is 我中國 (Tsou 1903, Essay 2, section 22) presents an object of identification that is far greater than the self (我), yet of which the self is nevertheless a part and which is also a part of oneself (我中國), a narcissistic identification supplementing and fulfilling the self. It is fundamentally a fantasy, as this is the only way that one can possess “five million square li of land, 400 million indigenous people, [and] over five thousand years of history.” Yet this imposing fantasy undermines itself by right of the fact that its image is, in addition to being greater than the self, also greater than its own reality. The resulting tension, rising increasingly to the surface in the period in which Zou was writing, makes this identification at once significantly more complex, yet also, as a result, far more powerful as an aspiration.

Zou's solution to this gap was the novel notion of revolution, the only path to provide a return to "heaven." As Zou wrote in his memorable introduction:

Sweep away millennia of despotism in all its forms, throw off millennia of slavishness, annihilate the five million and more of the furry and horned Manchu race, cleanse ourselves of 260 years of harsh and unrelenting pain, so that the soil of the Chinese subcontinent is made immaculate, and the descendants of the Yellow Emperor will all become Washingtons. Then they will return from the dead to life again, they will emerge from the Eighteen Levels of hell and rise to the Thirty Three Mansions of heaven, in all their magnificence and richness to arrive at their zenith, the unique and incomparable of goals- revolution. How sublime is revolution! How majestic! (Tsou 1968:58)

This passage acknowledges again the distance between the ideal image of the nation and its experiential reality, with its mention of slavishness, pain, death, and even hell. Yet it provides an appropriately "sublime" path for bridging this gap: none other than "that holy word, revolution" (Liu 1994), a word whose earthly manifestations have rarely lived up to its ideals. Not yet burdened by such realities, Zou Rong's articulation of this central concept in modern Chinese history envisioned revolution as not only sweeping away despotism and slavishness to make the soil of the nation immaculate, but also transforming the descendants of the Yellow Emperor, innately deserving of prestige, into Washingtons, a perceived preeminent symbol of prestige in the modern world. This almost mystical bridge to Zou's ideal vision was to reverse the general course of the nation and revitalize its inhabitants, bringing them from a perceived "death" back to "life" and, most importantly in light of the expulsion from *tianxia*, from "hell" back to "heaven."

Among the diverse national visions brewing at the end of the Qing Dynasty, none had more widespread and lasting effects than Zou's articulation of the nation and revolution, two concepts which were to become close partners throughout the historical cycle of twentieth-century China. The revolution which Zou envisioned in 1903 occurred just eight years later; yet



almost immediately, its promises revealed themselves as incomplete. In fact, the most pronounced aspect of the presumably post-revolutionary era following 1911 was its fundamentally non-“post”-revolutionary character. A strong state, ideally presumed to serve as a guarantor of a fulfilling national experience, failed to take shape, as General Yuan Shikai took the search for heaven all too literally in an attempt to recreate the monarchy. As the figurehead of the 1911 revolution, Sun Yat-sen’s vision of “recovering China” (恢復中華) and realizing unity and order (Hunt 1993:68) rapidly disintegrated as various parties split in opposition along lines of ideology, ethnicity, and region, while international humiliations continued in the form of the Versailles Treaty of 1919 and the Japanese invasion and occupation in the decades that followed. In his Awakening China, John Fitzgerald recounts a political cartoon from the aftermath of the 1911 revolution which succinctly captures the expectations and disappointments of this era:

In the first panel (“Past”), Sun Yat-sen in artist’s garb measures a picture of a majestic tiger preparatory to starting on a blank canvas. In the second panel (“Present”), Yuan Shikai takes over as the artist to the consternation of a group of onlookers in semi-modernized apparel. In the third panel (“Future”), onlookers and artists alike are dumbfounded when the copied picture turns out to be a mangy dog instead of a tiger (Croizer qt. in Fitzgerald 1996:30).

The same factors that have resiliently disenchanted national dreams, however, have also repeatedly created conditions for new dreams. On his deathbed in 1925, Sun Yat-sen famously declared: “the revolution has not yet succeeded. Comrades, you must carry on (革命尚未成功, 同志仍須努力).” Carrying on, the dialectic of national imaginings and national failures of this imaginary community accelerated toward ever more extreme paths to heaven.

### **III. Maoism and National Proletarianism**

On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written; the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.

-Mao, "Introducing a Co-operative," April 1, 1958

Studies of today's China commonly assert that the ideological vacuum left behind by Maoism has in recent decades been filled by nationalism. Although this claim presents a neat and compelling historical narrative, the suggestion that there was a transition from Maoism to nationalism, characterized by some sort of a radical break, overlooks the fundamentally nationalist origins of Maoism and indeed of the Chinese reception of Marxism as a whole, which upon closer analysis is simply another step in the reconstruction of the imaginary community. In the decades after Zou Rong's musings, the idea of revolution, which had yet to fully realize itself, was soon to meet a compelling new framework in the form of Marxist theory, which was gradually introduced into China in the late 1910s and 1920s.

Although an orthodox Marxist theory of history and economic development did not correspond to realities on the ground in China at the time, such simplistic observations regarding purportedly scientific or non-scientific application overlook the fundamental driving forces of Marxism as a political movement: affect, anger, desire, and fantasy. For those in China who were introduced to Marxism at the beginning of the previous century, this theory did not capture their attention because it reflected the fundamental truths of Chinese society at the time; rather, it provided a new all-encompassing vision, claiming to reveal the fundamental truths of the world and its course, closing off the fundamentally open process of history and providing clear answers as to who was in the "wrong" and who was in the "right." In the midst of a national crisis resulting from its lagging behind in the types of science and technology often associated with the

“modern Western world,” Marxism on the one hand presented aspiring Chinese Marxists with a seemingly scientific and modern theory of history, while on the other hand voicing strong opposition to the current modes of “Western” social and global organization. Just as Marxism appeared to reveal the truths of modern society while also providing a pathway to move beyond this society, it was a theory from the West which also moved beyond the West. As such, the false opposition between narrow nationalism and purported Marxist internationalism overlooks the fact that Marxist vanguard-ism is often a manifestation of a hubristic nationalism. For a nation in crisis, the determinism of Marxism provided thorough and redeeming answers that could comfortingly guide adherents yet again towards a new heaven on earth.

The key figure in this movement towards a new heaven was allegedly the proletariat. Considering the gap between imaginings and the reality of the Chinese nation, it is not surprising that Marxism’s imagining of the proletariat, exalted as an exploited, abused, and suppressed figure whose self-realization would nevertheless produce a new humanity, provided a powerful new object of national identification. According to Marxist historical prophecy (Popper 1963), the proletariat may be downtrodden in the present, but was to serve as the foundation of the new society of the future; despite their alienation and oppression in the present, the proletariat was destined to be the driving force of history; and despite the inequity and cruelties of contemporary society, the coming society was to be an aesthetically charmed and fantastic land free from alienation and oppression, with none other than the current proletariat as its ruling class. The resonance of this dual image of a demoralized yet inevitable messiah suffering for the cause of human redemption (Aron 1957) came to play an essential role in Chinese nationalist discourses, bringing not only individuals or classes into identification with “the proletariat,” but indeed the Chinese nation as a whole. According to Li Dazhao, the first scholar to promote Marxism in

China, the role that imperialism had played in the Chinese economy in the preceding century meant that “the whole country has gradually been transformed into part of the world proletariat” (qt. in Meisner 1967:144), which is nothing less than the role of world redeemer in Marxist theory. Raymond Aron has noted the inevitable appeal of the Marxist fantasy of history for one who identifies as proletarian, and a similar affective-identificatory process can be seen in the description of China as a proletarian nation. Through this ingeniously humbling yet also narcissistic identification, the indignities of the long and disconcerting 19<sup>th</sup> century were transformed into a mark of power and promise for the future, appropriating Marxist historicism to recapture the illusion of civilizational exceptionality. The bane of “backwardness” became a sign of “surplus energy” certain to burst forth to the “forefront of civilization” (Meisner 1967:65), encouraging heroic nationalist imaginings under the guise of a legitimizing internationalist vanguard-ism, while at the same time redeeming the Chinese nation as none other than the inevitable subject of history, guided by the legitimizing laws of history rather than the motivating factors of national affect and fantasy.

In a recent article on China’s New Left, Daniel Vukovich has argued that in order to understand the Maoist era, “we need to put it back into context as a powerfully affective *and* rational way of thinking, acting, and being-in-the-world” (Wang and Lu 2012:66). The main problem with this statement is that we actually do not “need” to do this. Vukovich’s assertion all too clearly reflects on the one hand the affective power of this worldview, while also displaying on the other hand the rational shortcomings of its “reason.” Such affective power and the imaginings onto which it opened first brought Li Dazhao and another of his acquaintances in this period, Mao Zedong, to accept a Marxist worldview. In turn, Mao and his admittedly unique politics and personality, eventually led these ideas to exert a profound influence upon modern

Chinese history. Yet the event heralded in Marxist-Maoist terminology as “Liberation” in 1949 was in actuality, in light of the analytical framework developed here, the beginning of a rapid acceleration of the dialectics of imagining and reality within the nationalist system. No other era in the modern history of China has been driven by such an overwhelming determination on the part of both leaders and citizens to overcome the gap between imaginings and experience which, as articulated in the previous chapter, is inherent to nationalism. At the same time, no era has been founded upon such overwhelming contradictions, symptomatically expressed in the compulsive yet reliably empty references to unifying theory and practice: the ideal of liberation was accompanied by a horde of ever-growing restrictions and a new servitude; the ideal of a classless and fully equal society was accompanied by a uniquely powerful and privileged bureaucratic class with unprecedented control over its subjects (Djilas 1957); the always inevitable victory of the people was accompanied by the repeatedly discovered scheming of the “non-people” (Schoenhals 2007); promises of material abundance which served as the backbone of national imaginings in this period were accompanied by an austere asceticism in practice, while the ideal of world revolutionary leadership brought increasing isolation; and, as occurred in communist revolutions throughout the world, the ideal of a rational and scientific materialism served primarily as a justification for a messianic, utopian mysticism. Yet most importantly, the central contradiction of this era was, as in the prior revolution and in the preceding crises, the gap between expectations and reality: whereas Marxism-Maoism as an idea provided a rich framework for imagining a seemingly inevitable utopia, it provided a far less successful framework for realizing this utopia in practice.

The product of these contradictions was a self-perpetuating cycle of imaginings, enactments, and disappointments, to be described below, which relentlessly accelerated and

intensified towards its perpetually unattainable goals throughout the Maoist years under the theoretically legitimizing and aesthetically resonant guise of “permanent revolution.” G. William Skinner and Edwin Winckler, in an analysis of the mutually contradictory yet supporting processes of mass mobilization and bureaucratic retrenchment characteristic of the Maoist era, have proposed the notion of a compliance cycle, which they define as “a recurring sequence of compliance arrangements and performance outcomes” (Skinner 1969:411) structured around goals, state power, and popular involvement. According to Skinner and Winckler’s analysis, the steps in this system consist of (1) mobilization of subordinates for a policy goal, (2) mass mobilization the “big push” towards this goal, (3) the coming of crisis with the high tide of mobilization, (4) retrenchment, and (5) a return to normalcy. This cycle is symptomatic of one of the central contradictions of the Maoist era, namely the tension between egalitarianism and bureaucracy: while policy guidelines inevitably originated from the leadership, the aim of the mass line was to mobilize the “people” as a means of overcoming the retrenchment of newly forming power bases and the growth of popular complacency and routinization. However, despite the emphasis upon voluntarist mobilization and the maintenance of a revolutionary spirit, the key role of policymakers in the construction of these movements ensured that whenever the Party-state had nearly reached its limits in terms of turmoil in mobilization toward its goals, radicalism would recede to be replaced by eras of normality (Skinner 1969:425). Yet if we proceed, in accordance with the current analytical framework, to move beyond a primarily policy-based standpoint focused upon goals, state power, and popular involvement to consider as a fourth factor material reality and experience’s pitiless resistance to these goals, new light is shed upon this cycle and the motivations and passions in which it was entwined. For the compliance which Skinner and Winckler cite in this cycle of mass movements is not based in a

pure command structure, but rather the ability of visions of the imaginary community to be distributed throughout the bureaucracy and throughout the populace across the geographical span of said community as collective desires, to be implemented in turn. As such, the notion of compliance should be expanded to include not only compliance between those in power and their subordinates, but even more fundamentally the ever elusive state of compliance between these desires and reality: what might be more properly called a non-compliance cycle. And yet again, it is precisely the resistance of the world to the fantasies and ideals structuring the imaginary community that propels this cycle ever further.

### **A. Leaping Forward**

A preeminent example of such a (non-)compliance cycle is the rise and fall of the Great Leap Forward. Having claimed the lives of between 15 and 45 million citizens in the years from 1958 to 1962 (Dikötter 2010; Yang 2012), this leap is one of the most extreme and ultimately tragic examples of the tensions between national imaginaries and material realities in human history. Celebrating the supposed achievement of socialism and heralding the subsequent transition to communism, the rhetoric of the Great Leap Forward promised that China would not only accomplish what the Soviet revisionists had never achieved, but even, by right of the superiority of the socialist system, overtake Great Britain in less than fifteen years, through a series of uniquely concrete yet also uniquely misguided socioeconomic steps (Yang 2012:89). The cornerstone of the coming transition to communism was the People's Communes, a fantastic idea drawn from the Marxist imaginary which combined recently formed smaller-scale agricultural collectives into significantly larger collectives promoting communal labor, living,

and provision of goods. Describing the deep meaning and purportedly very concrete origins of these imaginary communes in a speech at Beijing University on July 1, 1958, Chen Boda was eager to emphasize Marxism's rigorous incorporation with "Chinese reality:"

Comrade Mao Zedong said that we should steadily and systematically organize 'industry, agriculture, commerce, education and soldiers into a big commune, thereby to form the basic units of society.'... This conception of the commune is a conclusion drawn by Comrade Mao Zedong from real life (qt. in Meisner 1999:219).

Chen's closing comment, asserting that the idea of the people's communes is a scientific "conclusion" drawn from "real life," is particularly revealing. Logically, no clear connection is established in this statement to unite theory and practice by explaining precisely how the idea of the commune would come from empirical evidence in real life. Rather, this declaration provides a false grounding by denying the true origins of these communes, which in fact played a role, much like the idea of revolution, which can only be characterized as mystical: fetishized and even seemingly magical tools to imaginarily realize national fantasy against the resistance of experience. Demonstrating this other side of the people's communes as fantastic vehicles of imagining, one popular slogan from this era commonly attributed to Kang Sheng claims that "communism is Paradise, and the people's communes are the bridge (共產主義是天堂，人民公社是橋梁)" (qt. in MacFarquhar, et al. 1983:103). Returning again to the image of heaven or paradise heralded by Zou Rong amidst the collapse of all under heaven, this claim combines a utopian imaginary community with a supposedly clear and straightforward path to said utopia, generating a novel nationalist fantasy legitimized by pseudo-materialist references to its basis in reality. If Marxism had originally been designed to guide philosophical thought in descending from the heavens to the earth, the Maoist revolution reminds us that it was clearly not long before this thought wandered to the heavens again.



This heaven, transplanted onto earth, was characterized by a politics of haste (Sloterdijk 2009b:139) which knew no limits. Massive and once seemingly impossible projects to overcome and master nature, such as the damming of the indomitable Yellow River, the harnessing of the Huai River, and the digging of the massive Ming Tombs Reservoir (cf. Dikötter 2010:25-33), seemed to provide irrefutable evidence that “the people, and only the people, are the driving force of history.” Zhang Guozhong, the head of Xushui County in Hebei Province, promised constituents in 1958 that just two or three years of hard work would transform the world (Dikötter 2010:48). And in this “era of miracles” (cf. Dikötter 2010:38), an unprecedented abundance was promised for all. Mao himself envisioned free supplies of food, clothing, and housing as the standard for the imminent arrival of communism (Dikötter 2010:49). Yet such heady visions were given their most fantastic expression by Tan Zhenlin, a high-level cadre who not only played a central role in agricultural policy throughout this era, but also made unwavering contributions to inflating this period’s imaginings, as can be seen in his detailed articulation of the coming achievement of communism:

After all, what does communism mean?... First, taking good food and not merely eating one’s fill. At each meal one enjoys a meat diet, eating chicken, pork, fish or eggs.... To be sure, delicacies like monkeys’ heads, swallows’ nests, white fungus are served to each according to his needs... Second, clothing. Everything required is available... After working hours, people will wear silk, satin and woolen suits... Third, housing. Housing is brought up to the standard of modern cities... All live in high buildings. Needless to say, there are electric lights, telephone, piped water, receiving sets and TV... Fourth, communications... The time is not remote when each will have an airplane... Fifth, higher education for everyone and education is popularized. Communism means these: food, clothing, housing, transportation, cultural entertainment, science institutes, and physical culture. The sum total of these means communism. (qt. in MacFarquhar 1983: 84).

Considering the luxury, or ironically, what Maoists might characterize as the “bourgeois nature” of these images, from swallows’ nests buffets to silky smooth leisure attire to personal access to

airplanes, it is not surprising that this national imaginary appealed to popular aspirations and resulted in an unprecedented level of mass mobilization, at least at first. Yet it is also not at all surprising that material existence clumsily organized in the form of the practically less ideal people's communes with backyard furnaces and over-planted fields failed to live up to these promises.

Illustrating the admittedly unintended real-world effects of these ideas, the power of these images remained so great for leaders within the political system that they continued to reign over the Great Leap Forward era, despite their inconsistency with reality, with disastrous material consequences. After all, a command economy can compel subjects to obey orders from above, yet it cannot compel reality to yield to its visions. These collective imaginings, buttressed through a legitimizing historicism and nationalist *ressentiment*, reinforced themselves to the point of total collapse. Ever higher targets and continual over-reporting of output meant ever greater state procurements, maintaining an image embodied in grandiose economic figures and repeated pronouncements of ever larger harvests in order to cover over the reality of shortages and famine. In a visit to Hebei Province's Xushui County in 1958, Mao was clearly so transfixed by the imaginary reports of record-breaking yields that his mind was occupied by the quandary of how to handle the imaginary over-supply of grain, rather than the far more pressing question of how to handle the actually existing grain shortage. Considering the pressing realities of the situation, Mao surprisingly commented, in a slight variation on Marx and Engels' vision of communist utopia, that "with so much grain, in future you should plant less, work half time and spend the rest of your time on culture and leisurely pursuits, open schools and a university, don't you think?... You should eat more. Even five meals a day is fine!" (qt. in Dikötter 2010:41). The end product of the world's stubborn resistance to these self-perpetuating fantasies and the

repeated denial of said resistance were millions of unnatural and unnecessary deaths, attributed to this day to “natural disasters” rather than a collision between the insistent embrace of imaginings and the stresses of material existence: a collision which continues to this day.

In accordance with the compliance cycle model, the failure of reality to yield to fantasy eventually led to a retreat from radicalism in the early parts of the 1960s. Yet in accordance with the pattern of national imaginings, this retreat did not last long. Xie Fuzhi, one of the primary ideologues of the Maoist era, echoed the preceding analysis of nations as collective organizations that seek out but do not realize goals when he asserted that “a continuous revolution means ceaselessly coming up with new tasks” (qt. in Dikötter 2010:62). Undeterred by the consequences of this first massive imaginary project of the Maoist era, new and even more radical tasks were soon to emerge in hopes of realizing Beijing as nothing less than the center of a new civilization.

## **B. A New Central Kingdom**

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the morning sun. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you.

-Mao Zedong (qt. in Jiang and Ashley 2000:vii)

Following a brief retreat throughout the early and mid-1960s, national proletarian utopianism returned with a vengeance, transferring collective energies and aspirations from the field of economics to the field of culture in a mass movement that dominated the latter part of the

decade, known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. As Sino-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate throughout the 1960s, the claims that the Chinese government had attempted to make indirectly through the failed pyrotechnics of the Great Leap Forward began to be articulated ever more directly in a series of polemics and self-congratulatory declarations: Beijing was now the center of global revolution. Surpassing even the utopian visions of less than a decade before, the national-symbolic chain of this period (1966-1976) is instantly recognizable to any student of this era, as its declarations reached an unprecedented level of linguistic intoxication and self-glorification, to a point that seems utterly incomprehensible from the present. Mao, as an embodiment of the nation and its people, became the world's "greatest contemporary Marxist-Leninist" (Lin Biao qt. in Schoenhals 1996:20) whose thought was not only a "spiritual atomic bomb" certain to vanquish all paper tigers, but even the sole criterion of truth (Zhou Enlai in Schoenhals 1996:27). Amidst the confusion and inevitable difficulties of the unpredictable world, nothing could be more desirable than a single solution to everyone's problems. And arguably no single solution has been promoted and implemented more thoroughly than Mao Zedong Thought, precisely on account of this "Thought's" potential to exempt its adherents from actually having to think. Moving beyond the now seemingly lackluster promises of the Great Leap Forward's People's Communes, Mao Thought in the Cultural Revolution was imagined as capable of overcoming cancer, bringing hearing and speech back to deaf mutes, and even bringing people human beings to life from the brink of death (cf. Urban 1972), thereby finding a cure for the most persistent and unshakeable of dilemmas haunting humanity throughout its existence. A *Peking Review* article from this era tells the story of a certain Chang Chiu-chu, whose abdomen and chest had been filled with a massive tumor (Urban 1972:3). Faced with the dilemma of how to operate on this subject, the doctors pondered:

Our way was beset with all sorts of difficulties, but no difficulty can intimidate people armed with Mao Tse-Tung Thought. Take the question of anesthesia. We didn't have an anesthetist. Dr. Kao Chia-Cheng had once taken lessons in administering anesthetic, but for only three months. Now we assigned the task of giving Chang Chiu-chu anesthetic to a group of three led by him. They repeatedly studied "the three constantly read articles"- Chairman Mao's *Serve the People*, *In Memory of Norman Bethune* and the *Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains*- and considered the problems that might arise.... It was through such united efforts and wisdom that in the end they worked out a fairly good plan for anesthesia (qt. in Urban 1972:5).

Maoism herein serves not only a mystical but indeed a fundamentally religious function, at once representing the community while also providing imaginary solutions to any problems that this community might face. The Mao cult in the Cultural Revolution was then arguably the formation of a new monotheism, with its attendant production of a new "chosen people" at the forefront of historical development with unique and unfettered access to the final answer for the world. In an inversion of the descent from heavenly civilization a century before, China as the vanguard of the global vanguard was to oversee the export of the one true civilization to the perceived savages of the world, from Tibet to Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe to "the people" living in the centers of imperialism, who were expected to respond by eagerly embracing the wisdom of "Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought" (cf. Schoenhals 1996). The thrill of being at the center of such an imagining, in which the youth of the era found themselves, transformed the once maligned proletariat into the imaginary masters of the world, intoxicated by a "fascism of the good" (Sloterdijk 2009b:67). The clamor to rename streets and even oneself in this era (cf. Yan and Gao 1996) embodied a previously unattainable imaginary power to fundamentally reshape oneself and the world around oneself in one's desired image. Recent Red Guard accounts retrace memories of having found "a new type of society that could save the entire world" (qt. Jiang and Ashley 2000:65), and are notably characterized by such comments as: "I thought I was going to transform the whole world" (qt. in Jiang and Ashley 2000:14). Such

claims, fusing the self with a spectacular national imaginary that truly knows no bounds, show the intoxication of the visions of this era, which allowed for the enforcement of a stifling orthodoxy in the name of revolutionary rebellion. Much as the obsession with uniting theory and practice was symptomatic of the unrelenting resistance of practice to theory, subsequent struggles against “selfishness” and the emphasis upon a self-sacrificing “public spirit” (Lin Biao in Schoenhals 1996:18) in the rhetoric of this era ironically served only as self-aggrandizing denials of these fundamentally self-aggrandizing fantasies exercised in the legitimizing name of the good.

Yet, as has so often been the case, the world which these enthusiasts were determined to change in their ideal image remained resistant to their perceived unlimited powers. The grandiosity of national imaginings and the resistance of their realization are shown most clearly in two of the prominent features of the Cultural Revolution: its glorious spectacles and its unrelenting violence. In the spectacles of Mao greeting Red Guards on Tiananmen Square or overseeing massive national day parades, the unreal images of the national imaginary were fleetingly given material form. Resisting and covering over the weaknesses of the self-declaredly invincible “east wind,” these performances embodied in a Durkheimian collective effervescence the imagined power, unity, and glory of the community. Yet alongside these moments of power and unity representing the aesthetically charmed and blissfully united “new world,” a resilient obsession with the “old world” continued, expressing the gap at the center of national revolutionary imaginings. To counteract this gap, the obsessive rules and puritan taboos of the era,<sup>5</sup> by forcing an all-encompassing imaginary schema upon a resistant world, were not so much

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<sup>5</sup> Schoenhals (1996) features a revealing list of rules compiled by the Beijing No. 26 Middle School Red Guards. Taboo items and activities include bourgeois or artistic postal stamps, perfumes, cricket raising, and dirty jokes.

about erasing an actually existing bourgeois presence as they were about constructing by opposition an ideal vision of a pure and selfless standard that could in fact never be realized.

The widespread practices of Red Guards' smashing or burning items, or beating or killing people perceived to be polluting are equally revealing. The looting and burning of relics and other seemingly counter-revolutionary items, widely documented in photographs from this era, indirectly acknowledge the resistance of the material world to the prevailing imaginings, seeking a sudden and direct solution to persistent dilemmas of culture and politics through a sudden and direct change in material culture: even when dealing with actual material culture, the materialism of Maoism was still saturated with mysticism. As they charged into the homes of suspected counterrevolutionaries, imagining the at once despicable yet also powerful nature of these class enemies, the Red Guards sought out previously unnoticed and thus insidious deviations for elimination: testimonials from the era recount that such ransacking often included attempts to pry open the floorboards of homes, in search of some always hidden "bourgeois presence," lurking deep below and beyond everyday vision, stubbornly blocking the realization of the return to heaven. When this hunting logic was applied to people who had come to represent "non-people" (Schoenhals 2007) and thus became polluted material that needed to be destroyed, the results were disastrous, as human lives were yet again sacrificed in a final desperate act for the purpose of elevating the "victors" and invigorating a perpetually unrealizable vision.

The eagerness to realize this ideal vision eventually only compounded the founding contradictions inherent in this ideal, a pattern that emerged with increasing intensity in this last

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Everyone is to be referred to as "comrade," with the exception of "landlords, rich-peasants, counter-revolutionaries, hooligans, Rightists, and capitalists," who must wear plaques designating their status (qt. in Schoenhals 1996:212-222). From public space to personal habits to self-identification and mutual identification, the urge to produce this unblemished community extended throughout society to even the most personal elements, theoretically leaving no space for deviation.

decade of Mao's reign. The dispersal of the Red Guards following their enthusiastic mobilization and the downfall of Mao's former closest comrade-in-arms following his former canonization in countless images and texts resulted in a growing disenchantment with the ideals and imaginaries that had been touted in previous decades (cf. Jiang and Ashley 2000): ideals whose implausibility, while central to their appeal, had also begun to work against them. Maoism had begun as an attempt to return to the comforting and protective symbolic shells of a lost past, recapturing confidence and an imagined supremacy on the world stage. By the time that Mao died in 1976, after having promoted a series of urgent imaginaries which were repeatedly shattered, the national fantasy which he embodied ended as more of a burden than a pleasure, with politics, culture, and the economy in shambles. A major change was about to emerge; yet as I will show in the following section, this was primarily a change of tempo rather than a change in substance.

#### **IV. Reforming the Imaginary Community**

In 2010, the Theory Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department released a collection entitled "Proper Perspectives on Seven Contemporary Issues (七個怎麼看)" (Department 2010) which addresses, one chapter at a time, the increasingly pressing issues of regional inequalities, rising unemployment, growing medical costs, inequity in educational opportunities, skyrocketing real estate prices, income inequality, and corruption, and as advertised, informs readers of the proper, state approved perspectives on these questions. The following excerpts from the section on unemployment succinctly capture the transformation of the national imaginary in the reform



era, particularly when compared to the strident and urgent expressions of the Maoist era. Tracing the origins of employment issues in today's China, the authors assert:

...unique national characteristics, a complex economic situation, and high demand for employment have made the issue of employment in our country both complex and difficult. The Party and the government have already clearly pointed out that expanding employment opportunities is a major component in securing and improving the people's livelihood, and that encouraging employment is a priority in socio-economic development (Department 2010:24-25).

In contrast to the seeming certainty provided by Mao-era discussions of “the enemy,” “the bourgeoisie,” “reactionaries,” and “counterrevolutionaries,” and the attendant immediate mobilization of the people against these hindrances towards socialism, the official reform-era explanation of a reform-era problem provides a number of vague causes without a clear path for solutions. The distance from the imaginary community of the Maoist era is even more apparent in the concluding paragraph of the discussion of proper perspectives on unemployment, which reads:

We firmly believe that with the full implementation of the various policies and measures designed to promote employment, the employment problems of all types of groups experiencing difficulties finding jobs will be further alleviated. A more balanced employment structure and figures will be realized, the employment environment will be further improved, social security will be made more comprehensive, and the quality of work will undoubtedly be improved (Department 2010:34).

Unlike in the past, the imaginary community of the reform era does not offer the certainty of immediate and comprehensive solutions, the impending realization of ideal images, nor a space for national heroics. It was precisely this will to realize a national dream immediately which pushed Maoist era politics, society, and economics to the brink of collapse. Although faith remains placed in the eventual “improvement” of the situation and even the “alleviation” of problems, these are inevitably portrayed as gradual processes realized through policy

implementation rather than voluntarist heroics. Although it appears to be common knowledge that the reform era brought about a transition from Maoism to nationalism as a source of ideological legitimacy, the problematic nature of any such claim was demonstrated in the previous section's analyses of the fundamentally nationalist nature of the Maoist imaginary. Rather, as demonstrated in these excerpts which stand in such stark contrast to the urgency and certainty seen in the Maoist era, the true transition from the late 1970s to the present has been from a politics of haste to a politics of gradualism, and from the complete enchantment of the national space to its gradual disenchantment: certainly not a full awakening, but at the least the abandonment of certain pressing dreams.

Stepping back from the quite recent state publication cited above and tracing these trends through recent history, this shift can be seen in the first ideological debate of the post-Mao era in the late 1970s. Then-Premier Hua Guofeng, handpicked as Mao's successor prior to his death, promoted a policy of "two whatevers (兩個凡是)," which declared the necessity of continuing whatever policies Mao had enacted and following whatever instructions Mao had given. This policy was a logical extension of the fundamentally illogical relationship to Mao Zedong Thought, heralded over the previous decade as a singular answer to every dilemma. Signaling distance from this approach, reformist leaders in the late 1970s proposed a new slogan: "seek truth from facts (實事求是)." Although the subsequent handling of many controversial issues, beginning as early as the official verdict on the Cultural Revolution in the "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People's Republic" (Deng 1984), demonstrated that the "facts" referenced in this slogan were quite amenable to manipulation, this pragmatic transition away from Maoist certainty and urgency enacted the national reality

principle to return a degree of normalcy and patience to the national environment. In contrast to the repeatedly heralded imminent arrival of communism in the Maoist era, the political situation in the reform era has been somewhat more humbly characterized as “the first stage of socialism” (社會主義初級階段), suggesting that final goals are at a considerable distance. If Marxism claimed to bring thought from the heavens back down to earth, and if Maoism suddenly brought that thought rushing back towards the heavens, the evocation of facts by Deng and fellow reformers suggests at least a partial return to earth.

The political benefits of such a return are obvious, particularly in light of the destabilization across the political, social, and economic fields inherent in the hyper-imaginings of the Maoist era. By contrast, the aforementioned claim that China is in the “first stage of socialism,” for lack of a better term, has its ideological cake and eats it too. On the one hand, implicit within this claim is the assumption that there will inevitably be subsequent stages of socialism, which would naturally be more fantastic than the present, thus leaving space to develop and expand the idealized visions which play such a central role in any imaginary community. Both official and popular cultures have responded by filling this space with a flurry of pronouncements and publications foreseeing the future of China in 2020, 2050, and 2058 (fifty years after the 2008 Beijing Olympics). Yet, on the other hand, while opening imaginary space for new dreams envisioning how the community will develop in the next decade or half-century, these imaginings, naturally belonging to a distant future, are presumed to require great patience, explaining away issues in the present as products of an incomplete system, and thereby lessening the burden upon the state in the present. Thus, this framework can serve politically as a means of perpetuating the legitimacy of the present ruling stratum, which is envisioned as the

key link leading from the present to this more glorious future. This gradualist framework, when viewed from the analytical perspective developed herein, thus both maintains the imaginings of the community while lowering expectations in the present, essentially harnessing the formerly unwieldy imaginary community to a considerably more stable sociopolitical structure.

Although politically reassuring, the broader sociocultural implications of the imaginary community's post-Mao return to earth are far less certain. A post-urgent, post-heroic, and most importantly post-enchanted imaginary community operates in direct opposition to the fundamental motivating factors of such a community, based, as Rée observes, in “wild longings and weird fantasies” (Rée 1992:4). The Maoist era, while clearly disastrous in material and psychological terms, nevertheless provided through its continued dreams the false certainty of something always important and always wonderful just around the corner. The final insult, after decades of dedication and sacrifice in eager search of this elusive and enchanted ideal, was undoubtedly the arrival of a post-urgent and disenchanting era. In his reflections upon the “specter of Mao” in the reform era, Liu Xiaobo memorably notes:

We are faced with an absurd social tableau: the poverty of the Mao age was emotionally satisfying and exciting, it made people sing with joy although the social ambience was stultifyingly pure. The wealth generated in the age of Deng, however, has made the Chinese feel impotent and disgruntled (Liu 1996:276).

The transition which Liu notes here is precisely the transition to a post-urgent and post-heroic era, rather than a transition from Maoism to nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Just as Maoism aspired to recreate the all-encompassing ideology and world-renowned grandeur that is presumed to have existed prior to the arrival of modernity, so the subsequent disintegration of Maoism, just like the disintegration

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<sup>6</sup> A transition model which Liu also disputes in his study of nationalism in modern China, *Danren dujian: Zhongguo minzuzhuyi pipan* (*A Poisonous Blade: A Critique of Chinese Nationalism*) Taipei: Broad Press, 2006.

of the imperial ideal of the past, became a second expulsion from a retroactive paradise, producing a crisis within the imaginary community: a crisis which has been conventionally read as a rise in nationalism and a so-called loss of revolutionary values. Instead, I propose that the course of nationalism in recent decades represents a predicament in imaginings which is approaching the levels of the late Qing era. Reform and development may be practical, but they are by no stretch of the imagination the reddest sun in one's hearts or a spiritual atomic bomb. It was precisely at the moment of their rise, which Liu characterizes as "chaotic to the point of complete degradation," that the epigraph with which this chapter began was uttered. The question, "you love the motherland, but does the motherland love you?" expresses this agonizing break with the promises that had been built up over the past century, and the resulting emotional response of doubt, regret, and resentment, which transforms the nation into the image of an elusive lover who, after teasingly yet tantalizingly dismissing one's advances for years, has now suddenly moved on and left one behind.

Interaction between the political benefits of this gradualism and its sociocultural repercussions has in turn generated two trends of importance for the analyses that follow in the second part of this study. First, this disenchantment has produced a re-enchantment in both temporal directions outward, in an attempt to move away from the disillusionment and banality of the present. The reform era has seen the rebirth of a romanticized reimagining of the past in both official and popular culture, such that "the ideological distortions of the past become the foundation of the ideological distortions of the present" (Kapferer 1988:82). These imaginings are expressed most commonly in references to China as "one of the four ancient civilizations" with "five millennia of culture and tradition," founded in the era of the "Three Sages and Five Emperors" and producing the "four great inventions." The banality of the present is then

overcome through the wonder of the past: a solution not without contradictions, as will be analyzed in the second half of this study. In the other temporal direction, this era has also seen the production of a cycle of mega-events within the nationalist system, towards which countdown clocks have continually been counting forward in recent decades. From the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the 2008 Beijing Olympics to the 2010 Shanghai World Expo to the 2011 Guangzhou Asian Games to the 2012 Xi'an World Horticultural Expo, spectacular events and associated countdown clocks have been distributed across the country on a highly regular basis. Making up for the longer-term nationalist projects without a clear timeline, these clocks, displayed prominently in central locations, not only serve as a daily prompt reminding passersby of an important moment of unity to come, but also fundamentally restructure the experience of time itself around this coming event. The mundane and unbearably repetitive progression of hours from dawn to dusk each day characteristic of the reigning politics of gradualism is replaced by a constantly shrinking distance from a seemingly sacred moment, redistributing meaning throughout society. The wild imaginings that characterize the imaginary community have thus moved in both directions away from the present towards the past and the future. If the primary figure within the nationalist imaginary of the Maoist era was a smiling farmer, an austere Red Guard, or likely the Chairman himself, the primary figure of the reform era would be either a figure from the distant past such as the Yellow Emperor or Confucius, or a countdown clock looking towards the future: neither, however, would be located in the disenchanted present.

Second, this disenchantment has reintroduced with increasing urgency the elusive quandary that first plagued nationalist thinkers a century ago: where is the real China? The values promoted as central to the national symbolic chain in the reform era undermine

themselves repeatedly in practice. The notion of development (發展), central to the ideological legitimization of the current sociopolitical order, has emerged as an attempt to replace the singular answer once provided by Mao Thought and the nostalgia for the absolute (Steiner 1974) that its disappearance has produced. Nevertheless, development's side effects have been nearly as disheartening as those of Mao Thought, producing growing anxieties alongside growing wealth. As Han Clothing Movement participants recounted to me throughout my fieldwork, familiar city blocks regularly change to a point that they are unrecognizable within the span of a few years; homes have grown so expensive that at the precise moment that homeownership has become a real possibility for millions of urban Chinese, it simultaneously has become a lack for millions of others; air and water have been polluted, and food scandals have shaken public confidence, making one reliant upon resources which are potentially damaging to oneself yet which one can never escape; and the rush to "get rich first" has greatly damaged even the most basic forms of interpersonal trust in society, producing a constant vigilance against seemingly omnipresent con artists (騙子) and thieves (小偷). Although the notion of stability, heralded as a core value of the Chinese people, is embraced in both official and popular rhetoric, it is rarely experienced in everyday life, characterized by an increasingly chaotic and uncertain social context and urban environment. Although the idea of tradition, purportedly extending uninterrupted over five millennia, is newly praised as an essential component of each and every citizen's sense of self, the rapid expansion of urbanization and its modern conveniences and problems generates a feeling of increasing distance from the imagined grandeur and peace of the traditional past. And although the impending rise of China on the world stage is happily celebrated on a regular basis on the evening news, from an experiential perspective, one can only watch as real estate prices also rise, grocery prices rise, and tensions between "ethnicities,"

“classes,” and people in everyday life continue to rise; meanwhile, amidst all of this “rising,” many across the country face non-rising wages and social pressures to attain increasingly impractical markers of success. Moments heralded as the revitalization of the national community, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics described in the previous chapter, end up being far less fulfilling than expected, and do little to change the lives of the vast majority of citizens, despite their reliably fantastic promises. Faced with wonderful imaginings of one’s national community, the mundane experience of everyday life, and the unyielding contradictions inherent to the representation and experience of the present, the question of where the real China can be found in reality has reemerged as a central point of both fascination and concern in the reform era.

The previously cited collection from the Central Propaganda Department entitled *Proper Perspectives on Seven Contemporary Issues* (七個怎麼看) gave voice to this question, “where is the real China,” with a perhaps unintentionally resonant expression of the current state of the imaginary community:

The cross-sea bridge at Zhejiang Province’s Hangzhou Bay stretches over 36 kilometers. The product of over 11 billion RMB in investments, it is the longest bridge in the world today. This is China.

In Liuku Village in Yunnan Province’s Lushui County, residents are only able to cross the Nujiang River on a rope wire. It would only cost 400 to 500 thousand RMB to build a bridge across this river, but this is not an easy sum for an impoverished region like this to come up with. This is also China.

In the business district near Chongqing’s Liberation Memorial, skyscraper after skyscraper stretches upwards, business is thick in the air and unending crowds of people mix with flickering neon lights in the dark of the night, reflecting the prosperity and vitality of this area. This is China.



But less than 200 kilometers from this business district lays an impoverished village located deep in the mountains of Chongqing's Wulong County. To the majority of residents of this village, the single-digit electricity bills that arrive each month are quite a large expense. This is still China.

Perhaps you may ask, which of these is the real China? In fact, they all are. Since the initiation of the policy of reform and opening, our nation's economy has on the whole undergone rapid growth and reached accomplishments recognized the world over. Yet at the same time, many issues, including the issue of unequal development, have become increasingly pronounced.

The multiple phenomena and problems brought about by these trends are like a riddle (謎團), which fill the people's hearts with passion to investigate them further (Department 2010:1-2).

There could be no more appropriate characterization of the current state of the nation than a riddle: a question that inevitably has an answer, but which is not immediately apparent and which one must seek. And this riddle indeed, as this excerpt describes, fills people's hearts with passion to investigate further, bringing us back to the passions of nationalism from which Benedict Anderson's analyses began. The following chapters examine precisely how people respond and attempt to work through this riddle in the present, a riddle that was constantly on the minds of my informants, as well as analyzing the imaginings, passions, hopes, disappointments, anger, and surprises that result from their search for a final answer.

## **Part II:**

### **Returning to the Era of Han and Tang**

The master said, How utterly have things gone to the bad with me! It is long now indeed since I dreamed that I saw the Duke of Chou.

*-The Analects of Confucius, Book VII, 5 (Waley 1989:123).*

## Chapter 3

### Han Trouble and the Ethnic Cure

#### I. A Brief History of the Han Clothing Movement: Han-ness, Tradition, and the Revitalization of China

This riddle of the present and its problematical relationship to China's past was on clear display in a controversial attempt at national self representation in 2001 and the reaction that it produced online. In October of that year, leaders from the Asia-Pacific region gathered in the city of Shanghai for an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministerial Meeting on the theme of "meeting new challenges in the new century." Unbeknownst to organizers and participants, the leaders present at this meeting were soon to inspire the founding of a movement that would meet the many new challenges of this new century by seeking answers seemingly derived from past centuries: the Han Clothing Movement.

In a well-documented tradition, at each APEC summit, attendees are given "local dress" from the region which they are visiting.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, at the 2001 meeting, leaders gathered for a photo opportunity in the traditional clothing commonly referred to as "the outfit of the Tang" (唐装). Curious photos of the leaders collectively smiling in their newly acquired outfits, and of George Bush and Vladimir Putin chatting earnestly in the "outfit of the Tang," quickly spread across the Chinese Internet and around the world as representations of China and Chinese tradition.

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<sup>7</sup> This tradition began in 1993 when Bill Clinton handed out "bomber jackets" during an APEC summit in Seattle. It was only broken in 2011, when participants at the APEC summit to be held in Hawaii were either not asked to dress in the "aloha" shirts which are often associated with the islands, or explicitly asked to refrain from doing so. A series of photographs of this quirky practice can be found in the online article, "APEC Summits: what the leaders wore- in pictures." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2011/nov/14/apec-summits-what-leaders-wore-in-pictures#/?picture=381825716&index=5>

One problem, however, emerged within this representation of Chineseness: the outfit of the Tang was not in fact derived from this distant era known as the Tang Dynasty (618CE-907CE), often celebrated in the present as one of the pinnacles of traditional Chinese civilization. The outfit of the Tang is in fact another name for *magua* (馬褂), an originally Manchu style of clothing that spread throughout broader Chinese society during the Manchu ruled Qing Dynasty (Clark 2000). Chineseness was thus being represented in this case through what could be viewed, in a nationalist and essentialist lens, as the clothing of a peripheral people at best, or even an external conquering power. The Qing, furthermore, is a period that is not exactly celebrated as a pinnacle of Chinese civilization like the Tang from which the clothing's name is derived, insofar as it overlaps with the post-mortem construct of a century of humiliation and the eventual downfall of the entire dynastic system in the anti-Manchu 1911 Revolution. As such, some local viewers saw in this initially innocent and at worst kitschy photo opportunity ninety years later a disturbing attempt to represent Chineseness through disgraceful "barbarian" clothing.

According to movement histories, this awkward scene of the leaders of the Asia-Pacific region smiling joyfully for the cameras in their "Manchu clothing" (滿服) was the spark that started a Han prairie fire. In response to this scene, a now untraceable post was reportedly distributed on a number of popular Chinese BBS forums criticizing the representation of China on the global stage through the *magua*. The post declared that the most outrageous aspect of this sartorial slight was the simple fact that there was a far more suitable choice: a traditional style of clothing, purportedly first created at the time of the mythical figure the Yellow Emperor and worn for centuries by China's Han majority, which had been lost in the modern era and was being overshadowed by the *magua* and the *qipao* (cf. Chew 2007), which were after all the

clothing of barbarian nomadic types. This clothing, featured in rough sketches attached to the post, was characterized by broad sleeves and flowing robes decorated with brilliant colors and elaborate designs, and was known simply as “Han Clothing” (漢服), or the traditional clothing of the Han nationality.



**Figure 2- A design sketch of male Han Clothing, featuring a rich coterie of twelve symbols on its surface: a dragon, a phoenix, a mountain, the sun, the moon, the stars, a fire, an axe, seaweed, rice, and tools of ancestral worship (from Baidu Baike, <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E5%86%95%E6%9C%8D>)**

Soon, a series of online discussions and forums emerged surrounding this new yet ancient idea of Han Clothing. The initial post had a strong effect upon a number of so-called “netizens” (網民), who were attracted to the idea that the Han nationality, China’s previously unmarked

majority nationality, also had traditional clothing like all of the other nationalities. The best known of forums in which interested parties gathered is “Hanwang” (漢網), or the Han Network, located variably at the easy to remember addresses [www.hanminzu.com](http://www.hanminzu.com) and [www.hanminzu.org](http://www.hanminzu.org) (hanminzu refers to *Han minzu* (漢民族), the Chinese pronunciation of “Han nationality”). The site is home to a virtual encyclopedia of commentaries on Han Clothing overseen by enthusiasts with such colorful pseudonyms as “Legend of the Phoenix,” “Dream,” or “Great Eastern Wind,” covering such aspects of Han revitalization as Han Clothing design, history, religious belief, politics, military affairs, architecture, and medicine. And appropriately, for full dramatic effect, the site renders the date in years since the birth of the mythical Yellow Emperor.

Such online forums, as virtual anchors of like-minded individuals, served an essential role in the transformation of this imagined clothing style into a physical presence in the world, as it was through these sites that enthusiasts first shared personal photos of actual pieces of Han Clothing sewn in accordance with online sketches. And in an even more significant step, these forums were also the sites through which enthusiasts first posted photos of themselves wearing Han Clothing in public spaces. The most famous of such initial attempts was by Wang Letian of the city of Zhengzhou, Henan Province, who posted photographs of his 2003 journey under the pseudonym “Zhuangzhi Lingyun” (壯志凌雲), which is not only an ancient Chinese idiom meaning “great aspirations,” but also interestingly the Chinese title for Tom Cruise’s 1986 blockbuster film “Top Gun.” Like the sketches described above, Wang’s “maverick” photographs had an awakening effect upon viewers: the images were distributed widely, and his actions were imitated in the weeks that followed in cities across the country, bringing this

recently invented traditional clothing style into the physical world, and thereby officially initiating what has since been known as the Han Clothing Movement.

Since its founding at the intersection of Internet culture and self-display, the movement has developed over the past decade around (1) a rewriting of Chinese history through the vantage point of Han Clothing, and (2) the development of local associations dedicated to the promotion of Han Clothing and tradition in the present. Beginning from history, movement narratives claim that Han Clothing first emerged in the era of the Yellow Emperor who, as a mythical progenitor of the Han nationality, is naturally located at the beginning of history and is thus also the creator of Han Clothing, celebrated within the movement as the first clothing in human history. In the dynasties that followed, movement narratives assert that members of the “Han nationality” uniformly wore Han Clothing throughout these eras until the arrival of the Qing. As such, Han Clothing is envisioned as having been present at all of the great moments in Chinese history: the establishment of the empire under Qinshihuang, the flourishing eras of the Han and the Tang dynasties, the invention of the compass and paper, the expansion of the celebrated Silk Road, and all of the moments in between. As a tradition that lasted through the many celebrated moments in Chinese history, Han Clothing thus becomes a tradition intertwined with greatness.

However, with the arrival of the Qing Dynasty, a dynasty ruled by people of Manchu descent who would be considered non-Han in contemporary China, Han Clothing was lost. Alleging that Manchu rulers were determined to break the Han’s spirit, movement narratives recreate the famous Qing queue order of 1645, in which all male subjects were required to shave their hair into the distinctive queue style, as a queue-cum-clothing order which eliminated Han Clothing in the modern era. This historical twist notably provides a convenient explanation as to

why no one knows about Han Clothing, producing its suppression and erasure by “outsiders.” At the same time, it furthermore explains the challenges of modern history through the medium of Han Clothing. For just as Han Clothing is intertwined with greatness in representations of the pre-Qing era, so the loss of Han Clothing is associated with the ubiquitous discourse of the “century of humiliation” that followed soon thereafter. The loss of Han tradition, in the form of Han Clothing, then leads to the weakening of the Han’s ethnic spirit and the associated downfall of China from an imagined past utopia. Han-ness and Han Clothing thus become the key to understanding China’s past glory, as well as its modern predicament.

The Han Clothing Movement’s goal, then, is to resolve this predicament and recapture this lost glory through a revitalization of Han-ness, tradition, and Chineseness. An article entitled “Let the Revitalization of China begin from our Clothing- My Han Clothing Movement”<sup>8</sup> provides a representative articulation of the guiding principles of the movement:

- (1) Reconstruct our unique Han tradition through the beauty of our clothing and the grandeur of our rites and etiquette.
- (2) Respond to the threats of eradication facing each of China’s nationalities from the impact of cultural globalization.
- (3) Rebuild our mighty national spirit, making China’s innovation and power a leader in the world yet again, unable to be matched by any other nation.
- (4) Rebuild the standards for understanding the world through our own cultural background.
- (5) Develop the power of the people and awaken the consciousness of the people.
- (6) End the Chinese people’s tendency to repress or actively shun their national character, allowing us to have a correct stance towards our nationality.

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<sup>8</sup> “華夏復興，衣冠先行- 我心中的“漢服運動,” posted July 7, 2007 in the Baidu Han Clothing Forum, <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=112540805>



(7) Use the radiance of our thousands of years of Han culture to illuminate the darkness that has dwelled in our hearts in recent centuries.

(8) The Han Clothing Movement is a powerful movement of truly peaceful national liberation.

(9) Reverentially learn from and continue our Chinese cultural heritage, and open a new and exciting chapter in our national history through the spirit of revitalization.

The keywords of this movement are all too clear: Han-ness, culture, tradition, national spirit, national character, and cultural heritage. In response to the dilemma of modernity described above, which is explained through the downfall of Han tradition and the resulting loss of China's greatness, movement participants propose the revitalization of tradition, in the form of attire, behavior, and values, so as to revitalize the Han and, by extension, China as a whole towards the recreation of past glories. Or, as movement participants say, echoing the rebirth of the Roman Empire celebrated in Italian fascism (Berezin 1997), to "return to the eras of Han and Tang."

Towards these goals, associations have been established in cities across the country over the past decade, focused particularly in the urban coastal areas. Examples of cities with one or more Han Clothing Movement associations include Shenzhen, Dongguan, Guangzhou, Foshan, Xiamen, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Hefei, Zhengzhou, Jinan, Beijing, Tianjin, Xi'an, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Kunming. Most associations, in my experiences in numerous cities, are composed of young and fairly well-educated professionals. Such associations host weekend gatherings either once or twice or a month, or in some cases weekly, to bring together likeminded people and promote "Han culture." These weekend activities can take the form of visits to museums, temples, teahouses, or parks, the reenactment of elaborate traditional rituals, promotional efforts seeking visibility and converts in crowded shopping districts, participation in ethnic clothing shows, and self-produced variety shows. Whatever the

event may be on any given week, Han Clothing is naturally an essential fixture at movement activities, serving as a representative of Han tradition and the beauty of the “real China.” As a result, events inevitably generate attention from passersby, who at times make snide or mocking comments, stop to pose for photographs on the assumption that movement enthusiasts are dressed up as some sorts of “characters,” or in some cases stop to inquire and learn more about Han Clothing, and even spontaneously join the movement.

The Han Clothing Movement is a unique case in contemporary China, insofar as it is a nationwide social movement that is generally officially tolerated. This is most likely because, on the one hand, the movement does not violate any of the core political taboos of the day, and generally abides by the type of ethno-nationalism and political conservatism that is the core of contemporary state ideology (although often moving far beyond official nationalism and conservatism). On the other hand, the movement does not have much broader political influence beyond its websites and periodic gatherings in individual cities. There is no annual congress or other nationwide events, likely precisely because movement participants are all too aware that such activities would prompt an unpleasant official response. The ideal in participants’ minds, then, is that the scattered local promotion of Han culture will eventually bring about more substantive change on a national level. And there are indeed a few cases in which such national attention has arisen over the past decade: some positive and others admittedly more negative. In 2007, a representative to the National People’s Congress suggested that Han Clothing be recognized as China’s “national clothing,”<sup>9</sup> and an online petition sought its designation as the

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<sup>9</sup> “Representative to the People’s Consultative Conference Recommends Designating Han Clothing as National Clothing (*Zhengxie weiyuan jianyi ba Hanfu dingwei guofu*)” [www.confucianism.com.cn/html/A00030007/1540733.html](http://www.confucianism.com.cn/html/A00030007/1540733.html).

Chinese team's official outfit at the 2008 Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony.<sup>10</sup> In later 2008, a member of the Han Clothing Movement slapped Qing historian Yan Chongnian in public and accused Yan of beautifying the Qing (Leibold 2010), an act which brought a flurry of negative national publicity to the movement and its more quirky, extremist beliefs. Similar dismay emerged in the summer of 2009, when inflammatory and simply racist posts in light of the protests and riots in the ethnically Uighur Northwest region of Xinjiang led the government to shut down the Han Network website temporarily.

Whether positive or negative, local, national, or international, there is no denying that in less than a decade, a formerly unrecognizable garment has emerged as the center of a prominent and increasingly vocal subculture marking and celebrating a quite particular and highly resonant vision of the "real China." On first examination, the Han Clothing Movement indeed appears to be a movement structured around the Han, its past tradition, and an essential Chineseness. Yet as I show in the analyses that follow, precisely the opposite is true. Rather than being based in the Han majority, the past, and the "real" China, the Movement is primarily a product of the inverse cultural phenomena of "minorities," the present, and an imaginary image of China, emerging as at once a symptom of and a fleeting, illusory cure for increasingly pressing ethnic, social, and national dilemmas.

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<sup>10</sup> "100 Scholars Issue a Joint Statement: Make Han Clothing the Olympic Outfit (*Bai ming zuezhe fachu lianhe changyi: Hanfu wei Aoyun liyi fuzhuang*)," [http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2007-04/05/content\\_5935634.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2007-04/05/content_5935634.htm).

## II. Han Trouble and the Minority Origins of the Real Han

### A. Reconsidering Ethnic Relations

Early in my fieldwork, a group of friends in Guangzhou shared a Powerpoint presentation detailing the history of Han Clothing and the recent rise of the Han Clothing Movement. One of the first images in the presentation featured members of the official fifty-six nationalities of China, fittingly posing in the shape of the numeral “56.”



**Figure 3- Image of the 56 nationalities, on display at the Chongqing Museum, July 2011**

Each figure in the image is conveniently marked by a distinct form of ethnic clothing, one of the primary media through which ethnicity is represented in China (Harrell 2001:202-203). This

panorama of distinct ethnic outfits, shaping the “magic number” (Mullaney 2011:xix) of ethnicity, is furthermore held within the uniting embrace of a shadow in the shape of the People’s Republic, projected upon a sea of vibrant green grass. Signaling their presumed joyful situation within the bosom of the nation, each nationality’s representative displays a smile and waves enthusiastically towards the viewer.

My informants, however, did not smile back. Instead, they zoomed in on the image to show me the true object of their interest: their designated representative from “the Han.” If we look carefully, amidst the sensory-stimulating sea of vibrant and colorful ethnic costumes, the designated Han figure can be seen dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers.



**Figure 4- The Han within the national family**

Far removed from the costumes surrounding him, as well as even the superficially ascetic yet heroically aesthetic garb of the Maoist era, this image perfectly captures the disenchanted ideals

of the contemporary era, with the Han as its embodiment. This was not, of course, unexpected: it is precisely through such “normal” and “un- exotic” representations that the Han majority is constructed as the standard nationality, both modern and unmarked. Instead, what was truly unexpected was my informants’ frustrated response. This sight of the Han, purportedly the vanguard nationality of the nation, standing amidst a gathering of exquisitely dressed nationalities in a t-shirt and sneakers raised a quandary that I would hear repeated throughout my research: “is this what the Han nationality looks like? This is not the real Han. All of the other nationalities have their own ethnic clothing. But what about the Han?” Just as the unreflective directness of this image reveals the official framework of ethnicity, the directness of this question reveals the central concerns driving the Han Clothing Movement.

One might wonder, what could be wrong with this standard construction of Han-ness? Why is a new form of ethnic imagining emerging for a nationality already recognized as the core nationality of the Chinese nation? Anthropologists’ increasing focus on China’s once overlooked “minority” populations in recent decades has brought attention to the question of ethnic relations and representations in modern China: and in these matters, Han self-aggrandizement and minority primitivism clearly tilt ethnic representation in the Han’s favor. Within these representations, state-defined minorities are invariably portrayed as simple and primitive people (Blum 2001; Gladney 1994; Harrell 1995). According to the burdensome orthodox Morganian-Marxist-Stalinist framework of evolutionary history in which difference is inscribed in post-1949 China, there are five stages of history (primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism/ communism), and the various minority nationalities are distributed along these historical stages in the present, as “living fossils” (活化石) of past forms of social

organization (Fiskesjö 2006; Hansen 1999). It is because they are imagined as visitors from another era in the present that minorities are so frequently portrayed as “colorful” and “exotic” (Gladney 1994): whether displaying their elaborate ethnic costumes or participating in equally elaborate traditional cultural festivals, and whether dancing before CCTV’s cameras for the annual Chinese New Year celebration or joining in the “inevitable dancing in a circle” (Harrell 1995:27) for spectators’ enjoyment, typical representations of China’s minorities are lacking in neither color nor customs. Dancing, celebrating, and living in a bygone era, minorities are portrayed as “simple people” whose lives have yet to be impacted by the course of history.

It is not particularly groundbreaking nowadays to observe that the minority lives represented in these official and popular images of nationality do not bear any direct relation to the real lives of those labeled as “minorities.” Rather, as many scholars point out, in portraying and speaking of minority lifestyles in this manner, one is by implication constructing a particular image of the majority by contrast. Such a relational or boundary-based interpretation, an influential analytical framework in the study of ethnicity, was first articulated by Fredrik Barth in his introduction to the collection Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (Barth 1969). In brief, Barth argues against the once widespread idea that ethnic groups are discrete cultures developed in isolation from one another, showing instead how ethnicities evolve in interaction between peoples, producing ascriptive and exclusive groups precisely through their relations with one another (Barth 1969:14). Ethnic groups thus are not composed of unchanging ethnic characteristics, nor are they maintained through the transmission of characteristics over time; rather, ethnicity depends upon the establishment and maintenance of a boundary between one group and others. In light of these findings, Barth states that “the critical focus of investigation [of ethnic groups] from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group,

not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969:15). This mode of analysis importantly moves beyond the essentialist understanding of ethnicity, highlighting the relational nature of identity.

Applying this insight of the boundary to ethnic relations in China, it has become clear that when China’s minorities are portrayed as primitive, ancient, or “closer to nature,” the Han majority is by contrast portrayed as advanced and modern (McCarthy 2009); when minorities are portrayed as being occupied by “festivals, costumes, and the inevitable dancing in a circle” (Harrell 1995:27), the Han are busy “doing things” at the “forefront of development and civilization” (Gladney 2004:13). When minorities are portrayed as “exotic,” the Han majority is characterized as normal; and when minorities are envisioned as “marked” (by exotic customs or clothing), the Han majority is by contrast constructed as the “unmarked” ethnicity (Harrell 1995). Through a binary, boundary-based relationship with “the minorities,” a reliably flattering “majority discourse” (Gladney 1998) of the Han is produced, wherein this ethnicity is placed teleologically at the forefront of China’s development.

So, again, what is wrong with the standard representation of the Han? Why were my informants seemingly so outraged? Barth’s insights, as well as the analyses and critiques of ethnic representations that have followed in his footsteps, importantly denaturalize and advance our understanding of once taken-for-granted majority-minority representations by highlighting their construction around relational binaries, as well as allowing us to recognize the inequality that is essentialized and thus reproduced through such binary representations. Yet in its focus upon the relationship between ethnicities, this framework overlooks another equally important relationship, highlighted by my informants’ response to the standard image of the Han described above: the relationship of a majority to itself, or more specifically to its own representation, a



relationship that is never straightforward or untroubled. This is the “cultural stuff” which Barth’s boundary based analyses usefully de-essentialized; yet the de-essentialization of “ethnic characteristics,” although theoretically significant, certainly has not resulted in such ethnic characteristics being any less significant in people’s practical understanding of themselves and their world. Focusing solely on the relationship between ethnicities in the production of ethnic identity, such as the majority-minority relationship in Han-ness, thus produces a theoretical blind spot: the equally complex and significant relationship of those labeled “Han” to the content of “Han-ness.”

In light of this perspective, the attention given in recent decades to the ways in which ethnic representations are constructed against minorities in favor of an advanced, modern, and “unmarked” Han overlooks an important fact: being advanced, modern, and normal is painfully boring, as the Han representative in the colorful ethnic photograph described above could likely attest. In the relationship between nationalities within the official ethnic structure, it is the lack of “ethnicity” which makes the Han the default majority. Yet in the relationship of members of this group to its representation, it is precisely this lack of ethnicity which ironically undermines the presumed power of this label for its subjects, dethroning what would be the master signifier (Seshadri-Crooks 2000) of nationality. My interlocutors’ inquiry regarding the aforementioned standard representation of Han-ness, namely “is this what the Han nationality looks like,” importantly brings this experiential factor back into consideration, expressing their relationship to the standard representation of Han-ness and their desire to make the Han marked, enchanted, and most importantly enjoyable.



**Figure 5- A tale of two hands- A signboard shows one well-adorned minority hand and a lighter and decidedly plainer Han hand coming together for a harmonious society and solidarity amongst nationalities, Haikou, Hainan Province, December 2010**

As a person identified by the label “Han” in contemporary China, one derives from this label no unique characteristics to be preserved, no unique markings to display, no ethnic clothing to admire or to be admired in, and no Han show in which the majority can be placed on display before a captivated audience: modernity, normality, and unmarked-ness after all, do not make for a very exciting show. While these characteristics distinguish representations of the Han from the one-sided portrayals of minorities trapped within inconvenient costumes suited only for constant cultural celebrations, they nevertheless present a similarly one-sided and thus constraining vision of Han-ness, suited only, in step with the disenchanted and post-heroic atmosphere of the era, for such bland and practical concerns as “doing business” (做生意): the Han man’s burden. As the presumed core of the Chinese nation, some members of the Han have come to expect a more compelling vision. I call this conundrum “Han trouble” (cf. Butler 2006).

The question, “is this what the Han looks like,” as stated by my interlocutors, is thus the most succinct expression of these driving motivations of Han trouble within the Han Clothing Movement, as well as the most common, having been repeated throughout my research. For this question clearly presumes its own answer: namely, “no.” Yet beyond simply saying “no,” as some other equally emotive bestselling nationalist authors are wont to do (Song, et al. 1996), movement participants are engaged in the task of constructing a new (although purportedly eternal) vision of Han-ness. And surprisingly, this vision, reshaping the relationship between members of the Han nationality and the idea of their nationality, draws heavily upon already existent imaginings of minorities as “ethnic,” in a process of rearticulating the majority which I call ethnicization.

## **B. Ethnicization: Re-creating the Han**

In her innovative study of the origins of the Zhuang nationality and ethnic politics in modern China, Katherine Palmer Kaup meticulously traces the top-down creation of the previously non-existent Zhuang nationality from the 1950s to the present (Kaup 2000). The Han Clothing Movement, in its emergence over the past decade, has been engaged in a similar, albeit largely bottom-up project of re-creating the Han. And this re-creation of the Han, while claiming to revitalize an eternal and natural tradition, has in fact clearly drawn upon official representations of minorities as references for what characteristics a real “ethnic” nationality should possess, in a process which I call ethnicization. The question repeatedly raised by my informants in response to the image of the 56 nationalities, namely, “what about the Han?” ever so subtly points to minorities as possessing what the Han want, or, according to movement discourses, need. Thus, just as the question of the majority’s relationship to its self-image brings us beyond the relational binaries of the majority-minority relationship, it also immediately brings us back to this relationship, for in attempting to re-create the Han as “ethnic” (有民族特色), the Han Clothing Movement ironically derives its understanding of the “ethnic” from imaginings of the minority nationalities, the former sole possessors of said attributes.

Considering the consistent representation of minorities through fetishized images of clothing, customs, and dances, it comes as no surprise that a Han-ist movement would similarly focus its attention upon clothing, customs, and performance, articulating the once default majority through acts of ethnic transference. Against the standard image of Han-ness presented in catalogs of ethnic clothing (Gladney 1994), featuring Han citizens in “Western suits” (西装), sweaters, sneakers, or jeans which differentiate them from minorities’ more “traditional” ethnic

clothing, the Han Clothing Movement promotes an image of the Han draped throughout history in an elaborate, colorful form of ethnic clothing, similar yet also prior and thus superior to minority clothing. The purported rediscovery of this component of ethnicization provides a stable external marker designating one's Han-ness, while at the same time imaginarily projecting that marker backwards across the millennia, far prior to the modern emergence of a Han nationality. And against the standard image of the Han as unmarked and default, the movement further produces a nationality with enjoyable customs and characteristics "just like" the minorities. A careful index is kept within movement circles of properly Han activities, such as engaging in ritual, playing traditional instruments like the *gugin*, writing calligraphy, studying the classics, paper-cutting, embroidery and archery,<sup>11</sup> all of which are "ethnic" yet also clearly "civilized" activities. And against the standard casting of the Han as the viewer of ethnic performances by "minorities," movement participants eagerly promote performances which bring the Han on stage in ethnic shows, a topic that I discuss in more detail in the final section of this chapter. Yet most revealingly, minorities are frequently discussed among movement participants not only for their customs and clothing but also for their perceived ethnic unity and strength, supposedly derived from the preservation of their way of life. A Han Clothing activist in Guangzhou once told me that despite their backwardness, there was one area in which minorities were particularly adept: preserving their cultures and thus remaining united. In this process of ethnicization designed to revitalize the Han, it is notably ironic that members of the majority identify with the "ethnicity" of minorities, who are imagined to possess the tradition and customs, and thus the unity, strength, and fulfillment which the Han experientially lacks.

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<sup>11</sup> One Chinese scholar with whom I discussed Han Clothing succinctly summarized the movement as a whole as "young people doing old people things."

If, as Dru Gladney observes, “societies make and mark their majorities and minorities under specific historical, political, and social circumstances” (Gladney 1998:1), the members of these majorities and minorities also continually remake, remark, and indeed recreate themselves and their collective identities with shifting historical, political and social circumstances. The Han Clothing Movement is one example of such remaking and remarking. The Movement is a product of a founding lack in the modern Han, characterized as default, standard, and unmarked: as is often the case with majorities the world over, that which makes the Han the majority also makes it dreadfully plain and boring as an identity. Only by becoming “ethnic,” in the distinctly Chinese sense of having discernible clothing and customs, can members of the Han overcome the blandness of majority identity to truly identify with their ideal image of “the Han.” The movement’s focus upon Han identity thus takes an unexpected detour through tropes of minority representation, with surprising results. In the next section, we turn to an analysis of the Han Clothing Movement’s focus upon ancient tradition which, upon closer examination, is equally unexpectedly derived primarily from the experiences of the present.

### **III. Back to the Past in the Future**

#### **A. The Invention of Tradition as Inversion of the Present**

The Han Clothing Movement is based in the celebration of what movement participants consider to be an eternal tradition, passed down from their ancestors, and encompassing almost every aspect of their life as purely and completely Han. One of the first sites in which I had an opportunity to discuss this tradition in depth with movement enthusiasts was a Mid-Autumn

Festival gathering in a small teahouse buried among the skyscrapers of Shenzhen. A man in his late twenties who came from the relatively impoverished and rural province of Anhui led me through the formulaic set of questions that any “foreigner” in China has undergone countless times: questions about how long I had been in China and where I learned Chinese, inquiries about whether I liked China, comparisons of “Chinese” and “Western” behavior and tastes, explanation of the origins of the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the question of whether I liked moon cakes, the ultimate object of culinary ambivalence every autumn throughout China, received as gifts and just as soon passed on to others as gifts. But then when we reached a pause in the conversation, my new friend suddenly asked, “How much do you know about traditional Chinese culture?” Answering his own question before I could, he highlighted four components of tradition, namely clothing, food, housing, and transport (衣食住行), which he asserted were the core of Han traditional culture and thus of Chinese traditional culture.

When I asked him to explain these four components, he memorably and quite revealingly narrated each in turn. Considering that we were both attending a Han Clothing event, he began appropriately from clothing. Clothing, he told me, was elaborate and beautiful in the imperial era, and proper attire was a central component ordering society. Only when clothing was in order could society be in order. But Chinese nowadays, he noted, wear “Western clothes” with synthetic fibers. Men wear sneakers and “Western” suits (西裝), he claimed, that never quite fit them correctly, and women, he asserted, walk around with their breasts and buttocks hanging out, in clear violation of proper dress, and greatly degrading the grandeur of the Han as a whole. This Han Clothing gathering, he reassured me, would finally provide me the chance to see real “Eastern clothes” or “Chinese clothes”: just as the Han is the sole representative of China and

China stands in as the sole representative of “the East,” so Han Clothing is rendered as the sole true Chinese clothing and in turn, true Eastern clothing.

Another central component of Chinese culture, he continued, is food- Chinese cuisine is rich and diverse, and the experience of sharing a meal creates lasting bonds beyond people. Yet he quickly added that food nowadays is not always safe, and one must be careful what one eats. There is the infamous gutter oil, meaning discarded restaurant oil removed from disposal sites, reprocessed, and resold (Zhou 2007). There are genetically modified foods, which he informed me have been brought to China by the United States government in order to make the Han extinct, despite my clearly articulated skepticism on this point. And there have even been fake eggs, he noted, made from the mixture of various chemicals to resemble egg whites and yolks.<sup>12</sup> “The fake eggs look prettier than real eggs on the outside, but on the inside they’re made of cancer-causing agents,” he added, as we glanced warily at the dishes before us, which had long before grown cold.

Returning to the tranquil past, he affirmed the architectural skills of his ancestors: “nowadays, we think that we are more advanced than them. But in many ways, they were much smarter than we are, and had answers to many questions that we no longer remember.” Citing the canals supposedly created by Yu the Great to control flooding in pre-historical creation myths, he told me with a look of certainty that these canals and riverbeds remain strong to this day. Ancient houses, he added, were built using interlocking logs, providing unparalleled structural

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<sup>12</sup> The veracity of rumors about fake eggs has been hotly debated in recent years, likely on account of the massive amount of energy that would presumably have to be expended to produce and sell fake eggs relative to the likely profits. Nevertheless, a few cases of fake eggs indeed appear to have been verified in recent years. A 2012 article on Time’s website entitled “Bad Eggs: Another Fake-Food Scandal Rocks China” (<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/06/how-to-make-a-rotten-egg/>) recounts a recent case in Luoyang, Henan Province, as well as providing details on the fake egg manufacturing process.



stability: one could remain safe from earthquakes and any other external threats, a protection no longer afforded by contemporary structures. Pointing to the skyscrapers beyond the window, he asked, “How long will those buildings last? Apartments fall apart nowadays before you’ve even finished paying for them.”

Already seeing the pattern of his monologue, I was not surprised when he followed up his final comments about the importance within traditional Chinese culture of wandering and reflecting in quiet solitude with a simultaneously frustrated yet longing question: “where can anyone find time or space to do that today?” Then, with a sigh, he told me “the China out there today, the China that you are visiting, that is absolutely not the real China.”

The image of the past presented here is one of unrivaled security, certainty, peace, and order. It is home to aesthetic and mystical apparel, civilized dining practices, sturdy buildings, and leisurely strolls in solitude. Yet I must add that this portrayal was relatively constrained compared to many other portrayals of China’s past that I encountered during my research. Despite the fact that Han Clothing Movement devotees are fascinated by the past and its traditions, they did not demonstrate particularly rigorous research in historical or archaeological matters, focusing primarily upon vague fantastic notions and occasional references to the *Book of Rites* (禮記), which is not exactly a measured or reflective portrayal of everyday life. Fantasy was far more important than historical or ethnographic facts, and myth stood in for memory (cf. Berezin 1997:175), producing a self-satisfying image of traditional culture as a cure for all (Yuan 2012:46). For example, one informant told me that Chinese medicine long ago discovered the cure for cancer, but that it had been lost in the rush to embrace “Western” medicine, which in his analysis could only contribute to rather than alleviating such illness. The nutritional absorption

from tea in the past, I was told during a traditional tea preparation ceremony, totaled more than twice the nutrients absorbed from modern-day mass-manufactured tea. There was also no pollution: precisely because everyone in the past washed their hair with tea rather than “chemical” shampoos. Another informant told me in all seriousness on a number of occasions that the people of China in the past could teleport from one location to another simply through the power of their minds. Thanks to this power, ancient maps were just as accurate as contemporary satellite based maps, because cartographers’ spirits were able to leave their bodies and view the landscape from above. And in a most interesting anachronism, I was told on two occasions that China’s GDP during the Song Dynasty, immediately prior to the hated Mongol takeover and thus at the imagined pinnacle of national glory, constituted a massive 40% of global GDP.

This final example, appropriating the undeniably modern concept of national gross domestic product and applying it to the Song era, highlights an essential aspect of these imaginings of the past: just as the re-creation of the Han described in the previous section is based in the fantastic reimagining of this nationality against the bland and unmarked representations of modern Han-ness, so the image of the past heralded by the movement is similarly based in the unfulfilled desires of the present, and in determined opposition to its realities. Thus, to voice a perfectly reasonable skepticism as to whether life was in fact so perfect in the pre-modern era is to overlook the far more significant fact that this construction is not at all about the past, but rather solely about the present and its discontents. We can see this relationship between the past and the present expressed most revealingly in the aforementioned monologue, in which two completely different worlds emerge as intertwined yet inverted images of one another: the undeniable and uncontainable grandeur of the national past, with its elaborate

clothing, healthy food, secure abodes, and peaceful quiet, standing in stark contrast to the bared buttocks, contaminated food, collapsing buildings, and cramped, chaotic cityscapes of the present. Similarly, the examples of the cure for cancer, abundant nutrition, teleporting power, and world-conquering GDP imagined to have existed in the past reflect the lack or persistent anxieties surrounding these issues in the present.

It is not, however, particularly novel to simply recognize traditions as “invented” or to trace their foundations in the concerns of the present. This much has been clear since the publication of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s edited volume *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Nevertheless, the question of precisely why traditions are invented and why such imaginings of the past have become so central to human experience in the present remains largely unanswered. The Han Clothing Movement’s evocation of the national past and “tradition” sheds light upon these questions, revealing the power of tradition as simultaneously an unrestricted medium of fantasy and a stabilizing source of identity, which serves within this context not only as an invention, as previously observed, but indeed as a therapeutic inversion.

The lack of restrictions upon the imagining of the past, allowing for visions of unrivaled security, lack of illness, and most importantly an all-encompassing wholeness, makes it an ideal medium of fantasy whose expansiveness stands in stark contrast to the all too immediate restrictions apparent in the experience of the present, characterized by its anxieties, uncertainties, and instabilities. Of course, as described in the previous chapter, this fantasy construction is and can only be a retroactive romanticization, benefiting from distance: any and all societies across time and space are plagued with problems and uncertainties. Consider, for example, the *Analects*,

a classic that played an essential role in sociopolitical organization throughout the imperial era which movement enthusiasts romanticize. Yet this romanticization forgets that the *Analects* were in fact based in the similar imagining and celebration of the glory days of the Zhou Dynasty, a sort of political Garden of Eden. So, even if movement participants were somehow able to travel back in time to the pre-modern era which they view so fondly, they would undoubtedly still find plenty to complain about, and perhaps yearn to return further back to the splendor of the Zhou, towards which people in the pre-modern era were already yearning, and which in the end was also probably not anywhere near as wonderful as Confucius claimed. The longest standing tradition is then the fundamentally imaginary exaltation of tradition.

At the same time, this unbounded imagining's detachment from fundamental realities is denied through its false grounding as "our" past and tradition. In his insightful study of nostalgia as a sociocultural phenomenon, Fred Davis points out that nostalgic "memories" "reassure us of past happiness and accomplishment and, since they still remain on deposit, as it were, in the bank of our memory, [they] simultaneously bestow upon us a certain current worth, however much present circumstances may obscure it or make it suspect" (Davis 1979:34). Although Davis is speaking here of nostalgic memories in actual personal life experiences, his point is nevertheless of equal relevance to the imaginary nostalgia promoted by the Han Clothing Movement. For in rendering these imaginings as historical memory, they are represented as realities that actually existed on the same geographical space in which participants currently live, amongst their common ancestors, intertwining them with Han identity as the only moment in which a truly Han society reigned. In this manner, to borrow a phrase from Stephanie Coontz's illuminating critique of portrayals of the "traditional" American family (Coontz 1992), "the way we never were" is rendered as the way we definitely were, and will be again.

## **B. Ways of Being Ethnic in Urban China**

Such an idealized construction of the past not only provides imaginary solutions to the confounding problems of the present, naturalizing this solution as pure “Han tradition” which has existed again and will return. Furthermore, in relation to the present, the false identity thus established with these romanticized imaginings furthermore absolves “the Han” from responsibility for the often overwhelming dilemmas of contemporary society, articulated so powerfully in the monologue recounted above. The current social and political situation in China has been primarily produced by those labeled “Han,” insofar as they constitute over 90% of the population and are invariably represented as the vanguard nationality in contemporary China’s struggle towards the elusive ideal of modernity. State-defined minorities, by contrast, have been portrayed as “living fossils,” as cited above, who are to be appropriated and transformed by the civilizing powers of this more advanced Han culture. Described at times as resembling a snowball rolling down a hill, capturing and incorporating other nationalities into its culture (Xu 2012), such a portrayal of the Han is a modernist reincarnation of the distinction of culture and barbarism that played such an essential role in understandings of Chinese civilization in the pre-modern era. Yet by being tied to the dominant ethos of society in the present through the equation of Han-ness and modernity, the Han is thereby tied not only to the progress and benefits of this process, but also to its destabilizing and anxiety provoking effects, which have become increasingly apparent in recent decades. As described in the monologue above, the present is burdened by its persistent unhinging of essential components of social life precisely at the moment that they come to appear widely available: the development of the seeming mega-cities

of the future has resulted in countless examples of forced and uncompensated “relocation” across the country (Shao 2013); the relative abundance of food in the reform era has been undermined by the anxieties surrounding unsanitary and even purposefully hazardous food preparation (Zhou 2007); the ability to travel and see new places has been undermined by the overwhelming pollution that has come to cloak many of the country’s cities and rural areas in recent decades (Economy 2010); an abundance of information has been undermined by the unrelentingly strict control over and persistent homogenization of media (He 2007); the opportunity to buy an apartment has been undermined by ever-expanding wealth differentials and uncontrolled inflation; and the perceived rise of the Chinese nation on the global stage has been undermined by the rapidly growing lack of trust in and disillusionment with the current system, as well as between people. As each accomplishment emerges within and is distributed throughout contemporary society, of which the Han is the representative nationality, the aforementioned feeling of “that’s not it” (Stavrakakis 1999:45) follows soon thereafter. And as a result, after decades of unwavering evolutionist certainty regarding a “plural (多元)” society eventually becoming “one (一體),” the Han snowball rolling down a hill seems, in Han Clothing Movement interpretations, to only be gathering speed toward a dangerous cliff.

The lost past and its celebration as the truth of Han-ness are then products of these realities and their denial. By alienating contemporary society as an external imposition (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) and a violation of Han-ness, the wavering certainty of the previous teleology of modernity, embodied in its idealized future with the Han at the forefront, is replaced by the certainty of a new teleology based in an idealized past, with the Han again at the forefront in a counter-image of a simpler true Han society. Han Clothing Movement narratives

look backwards towards a past harmonious sphere of existence where, one might note in light of the previous analysis of the relationship between Han and state-defined minorities, “the minorities” with their simple ethnic ways and charming innocence were always already presumed to be located in the popular imagination. Rather than living in cramped and disorienting city spaces, or spending their lives in office cubicles or on factory floors, one’s true Han ancestors are imagined to have lived in large open spaces in which one could take in the beauty of nature, carefree in one’s long, flowing robes; rather than struggling with and suffering through a threatening and polluted environment, one’s true Han ancestors were literally one with all in the world and in the heavens (as expressed in the reemerging trope of the unity of humanity and the heavens, 天人合一), living amidst the serene quiet of rolling, grassy hills, in unity with a pure and nurturing natural environment, and raising animals and vegetables on organic farms; rather than worrying about what food to eat or to feed to one’s children, all was prepared naturally: food came straight from the fields, and children were fed directly from their mother’s breast;<sup>13</sup> and rather than living in a constant state of uncertainty and vigilance, one’s ancestors lived in a disciplined society ordered by hierarchy and accompanying rituals of respect. Life was simpler, purer, more honest, orderly, and bound in fraternal unity.

Despite the quite obvious nostalgia for a past constructed in opposition to the present, participants are adamantly dismissive of the idea of nostalgia (懷舊), often used in Chinese media descriptions of the movement, denying that they are in any way involved in any such nostalgic activities. Consciousness of nostalgia, after all, endangers the power of said nostalgia (Davis 1979). Rather, participants assert that their sole purpose is realizing their true identities,

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<sup>13</sup> An object of particular fascination for certain wings of the neo-traditionalist movement, to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

against the false revisions and additions of recent centuries. These are the identificatory imaginings of an imaginary community: by envisioning this community as a lost reality proper to the Han, a dual operation of amnesty and fantasy is realized, whereby members of “the Han” are exonerated from having produced the present society with which they are disillusioned, while at the same time imagining in its place a “true Han society” that must and most importantly can be recaptured in order to realize, as the following section describes, the “real China.”

#### IV. The Real China

The monologue comparing traditional and contemporary China recounted in the previous section ends upon a revealing note worth analyzing more closely: “the China out there today, the China that you are visiting, that is absolutely not the real China” (不是真正的中國). I was repeatedly informed throughout my fieldwork in similar declarations that the China of today was not the “real” or the “true” China (不是真正的中國 or 不是真實的中國 or 不能算是真正/真實的中國).<sup>14</sup> And I was repeatedly surprised that the Han-Chinese nationalists with whom I was working ironically spent a considerable amount of their time complaining about the Han and China. Their “real” China, on account of its boundless greatness, could not to be found in the disappointing present. This “real” China could only be found in the unfettered imaginings, built in opposition to the shortcomings of the actually experienced geographic space now called China, around which the movement was organized and which it aims to enact. Just as the contemporary mainstream representation of Han-ness is dismissed as false, such that the “real Han” is to be

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<sup>14</sup> The notion of “zhengzheng” has been translated as “real,” but also carries with it further connotations of “correct,” “authentic,” or “true.” This phrase “bu shi zhengzheng de Zhongguo” suggests that China is not “as it should be,” but remains based in the belief that China can be rectified to achieve its true status again.



found through a process of ethnicization modeled on state-defined minority representations, and just as contemporary society is dismissed as an anomaly, such that “real Han tradition” is to be found in an imagined past which inverts the troubling realities of the present, so the contemporary reality of China experienced on a daily basis is dismissed as unreal, such that the “real China” is to be found in the acting out of romanticized imaginings of what China should, could, and, in movement narratives, must be. Each of these examples, while seeming paradoxical at first, in fact only reflects the paradoxical core of national identity, trapped in the gap between grandiose imagining and disappointing experience, analyzed in the first chapter of this study as the founding distinction and affective driving force of nationalism.

This split between imagining and experience was expressed most clearly in a poem that is popular among movement participants nationwide, which was read aloud, in unison, at a public gathering of the local Han Traditional Culture Study Group under the blazing Guangzhou sun in August of 2011. The poem read as follows:

When I climb onto the ancient city walls,  
 Touch its weathered columns with my hands,  
 And lean excitedly over its edges to glance into the distant horizon,  
 I can't help but sense a bitter taste on my tongue,  
 As I hear a voice from above ask: do you remember?  
 You are a descendant of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor.

... I have dreamed of returning to the Great Tang,  
 Wandering around with Li Bai,  
 Whose sword reflects light so radiantly,  
 And whose lover is the moon above.  
 I have seen him hovering beneath the moon, singing towards the skies,  
 As the strong wind blew his hair and long robes,  
 He floated like a being from the heavens.

... Today, centuries later, as I walk into McDonalds,  
 Wearing Gucci and singing “My Heart Will Go On,”  
 I feel a gnawing pain inside,

And hear that voice from above: Have you forgotten?  
 You are a descendant of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor.

And then I remembered, a pack of brown haired and blue eyed hyenas,  
 Destroyed our temples and our ancestral halls with their warships and their cannons.  
 So today, a century later,  
 We know freedom and democracy,  
 But have forgotten our civilization's cardinal ethics.  
 We have toddler prodigies, who can play piano,  
 But have forgotten our own musical scales,  
 We can build the tallest skyscrapers,  
 But can't find room for even one memorial archway for a moral exemplar,  
 We wear suits and leather shoes,  
 But lack our own national clothing.  
 Where are you, oh land of rites and etiquette?  
 Where are you, children of the Han?

This poem begins by envisioning a figure strolling along the ancient city walls and glancing outwards toward the landscape beyond in the present, a landscape undoubtedly populated with less imposing structures than the city wall. As the subject is glancing outwards into this distance, symbolically split between the real China before his or her eyes and the “real China” represented by the city wall beneath his or her feet, a voice suddenly appears to remind the wanderer of his or her magnificent cultural roots: “do you remember?” This reminder initiates a fantastic journey through Chinese history from Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor, the mythical first sovereigns and purported direct ancestors of the Han, to a mystical and psychosexually suggestive image of Tang era poet Li Bai floating, grasping his radiant “sword,” and singing towards his lover the moon, as if he was a figure from the heavens. Fantasy here is rendered as historical memory.

Yet this fantastic journey comes to a sudden conclusion in the return to the banal and even polluted present, where the tensions between the imagined past and disenchanted experience are represented in the image of a stereotypically “non-Chinese” Chinese singing a

pop song from the Hollywood film “Titanic” and preparing to order a quick taste of deep-fried enjoyment from a multinational company. In this moment, the voice which repeatedly haunts the narrator, tauntingly asking “do you remember- you are a descendant of the Yan and Yellow Emperor,” embodies a nationalist-culturalist superego, insofar as it appears to scold the subject for betraying his or her weighty responsibilities as a descendant of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor. This culturalist superego, however, is furthermore intertwined with a nationalist-culturalist id of self-aggrandizing desire, insofar as one’s primary responsibility as a descendant of the Yellow Emperor would be nothing less than greatness. This poem’s popularity within the Han Clothing Movement can thus be attributed to its powerful expression of the central tensions underlying the movement’s visions of its imaginary community: enjoyment and shame, pride and uncertainty, and grandeur and decline, themes of a frustrated national narcissism captured most clearly in the closing comparisons of the perceived crude vapidness of contemporary society (the real China, represented by imported political ideologies, cut-throat competition from a young age, banal clothing, and endless skyscrapers) and the idealized images of traditional culture (“the real China,” represented by ethics, moral exemplars, cultural purity, and aesthetically appealing national clothing). The longing resulting from these tensions between the national imaginary and actual experience are given voice in the questions posed at the end of this poem: “Where are you, oh, land of rites and etiquette? Where are you, children of the Han?”

For movement enthusiasts, the land of rites and etiquette and the children of the Han, missing in everyday experience, are found in the Han Clothing Movement, suturing<sup>15</sup> the unforgiving distance between realities and national imaginings. The Internet provides an ideal space for imagining such alternative realities and identities, to the point that online personas have

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<sup>15</sup> Like “the imaginary” described in footnote 1, “suture” is also employed here as a Lacanian term, meaning a measure that, however temporarily, closes the gap between the imaginary and experience.

begun to take the place of in-person self-presentation in recent years. This most modern of communication tools has thus ironically provided the foundation for this growing traditionalist movement. “Han Clothing” itself actually began, as described above, as a series of online sketches in the early part of the past decade, designed to imagine an alternative self-presentation for viewers who could identify with these stunning designs as “Han” and thus as their own. This innovation opened up a space for people to envision alternative identities for themselves, always comfortably under the legitimizing framework of a purportedly eternal ethnic identity and tradition. Forums developed in which a growing collection of enthusiasts took on such names as “Dream,” “Legend of the Phoenix,” “Six-Veined Sacred Sword,” “Brother Emperor,” or “Great Han.” One might note that these are not in any way, shape, or form traditional Chinese names. Rather, they are imagined traditions expressing a certain fantastic and mystical vision of personhood in pre-modern China, which is after all what this movement is all about. The Internet’s simultaneous detachment from and intertwinement with contemporary reality has made it an ideal testing ground for such visions.

However, alongside the rapid proliferation of internet images, there remained a desire to move beyond images, and to bring these imaginings into the external reality that they deny: it was thus not long after sketches of Han Clothing first appeared online that a few movement pioneers began preparing apparel based upon these images, and started wearing them in public spaces and eventually hosting regular weekend gatherings. As described in the introduction to this chapter, such weekend gatherings are hosted nowadays in cities extending across China, from Beijing in the north to Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the south, and from Shanghai and Nanjing in the east to Kunming and Chengdu in the west. Usually held very early on Saturday mornings, these gatherings produce an alternative world representing the real China, one

morning at a time. Because this “real Han” is a complete break with the ordinary, real Han, the types of weekend activities that enthusiasts organized reliably became a social world unto themselves, with an uncertain and even ambivalent relationship to the surrounding environment on full display in activity planning and execution. On the one hand, gatherings are sometimes held in central city spaces which provide an abundance of onlookers and potential converts. However, this centrality poses real problems: over-crowding, staring, laughter, misrecognition as “Japanese devils” (日本鬼子), and frequent requests for performances from what quite a few bystanders mistakenly assumed to be a “song and dance troupe” (歌舞團). Thus, amidst the emphasis upon visibility, a similar emphasis is placed upon creating a detached space: locations are sought with a pleasing natural background removed from the usual urban environment in which participants toil day to day. Common examples include parks, mountains, or tea houses.

A clear protocol on greetings between members marks the entrance into this alternative, usually secluded, and indeed sacred space, representing the real China. Arrivals reliably greet one another with clearly prescribed hand gestures: rather than patting one another on the back, shaking hands, or exchanging cigarettes, arriving participants would fold their hands together at a distance and bow solemnly and slowly at a forty-five-degree angle towards other participants. From that moment onward, participants use their movement pseudonyms to re-cast their image, symbolically representing their transition from the world of the ordinary to the extraordinary. The grandiosity of the names by which participants refer to one another, as well as the mastery implicit in the otherwise unattainable act of self-naming, testifies to the enchanted alter egos that participants aimed to construct. Such unwieldy self-aggrandizement, however, exists alongside a strong emphasis upon protocol, reflecting the simultaneously fantastic and stabilizing role of

“tradition.” Movement rules required participants to have their hair clean and combed, to refrain from wearing sneakers, and to refrain from smoking, for fear of shattering the powerful yet fragile “traditional” aura produced in these gatherings. Group meals revolved around healthy selections or, on days in which participants were particularly enthusiastic, vegetarian restaurants. All events were held completely free of charge, and meals shared amongst participants were always split evenly, avoiding at once the ubiquity of profit-driven motivations in contemporary society as well as the opaque and burdensome web of *guanxi* produced in the socially instituted fight for the bill. The balance between self-aggrandizement and collective discipline, indicating participants’ simultaneous desire for the grandeur and meaning but also the control and order that was lacking in their lives, is tellingly also captured in the figure of an at once aesthetically elaborate yet strictly regimented ethnic uniform, around which this movement is organized. From names to clothing to social interactions, the world of Han Clothing gatherings was an inverted image of the wider world in which participants lived, a secure albeit illusory sphere far removed from the banality, uncertainties, and pressures of the present, providing participants with a rare although purportedly timeless sense of meaning, dignity, glory, peace, and control.

The Han Clothing Movement thus denies the reality of mainstream representations of the Han nationality, borrowing from motifs of state minority representation to make the Han “ethnic” and “traditional.” The movement furthermore denies the reality and legitimacy of the present, constructing a distant and ideal past that imaginarily inverts the present to become the one and only true Han society. And finally, the Han Clothing Movement denies the reality of contemporary urban life in China, imagining in its place a fantastic “real China,” a land of rites and etiquette free from the concerns of the present, with the Han, draped in five millennia of

tradition, standing at its pinnacle. Here, and here alone, participants find their Han-ness and their real China.

## **V. The Han Show**

This real Han standing at the highest peaks of the real China was on full display at a Chinese Nationalities' Culture Festival (中國民族文化節) held at Guangzhou's Jinan University in November of 2010. Once the sole purview of China's minority nationalities, with the Han sitting reliably in the audience (Gladney 2004:45), the fantasy ethnicization processes within the Han Clothing Movement have opened the door for Han participation in ethnic culture shows. This particular festival had in previous years consisted primarily of Han college students dressing as minorities and dancing for other primarily Han college students in the audience, but its organizers had been convinced by local enthusiasts to incorporate the Han as a nationality into their 2010 show. I was invited to watch and fulfill my usual responsibilities for the local Han Clothing organization: taking a gratuitous number of photographs.

The program featured performances from a number of Han students as "minorities," in a discomfiting style reminiscent of the happy-go-lucky portrayals of minstrel shows. We began the evening with a Yao dance, performed at a rapid tempo with an array of colorful costumes, and a throng of jumping, twirling, and shouting women. Next, we viewed a performance by a group of supposed Mongolians, characterized in advance by the master of ceremonies as a particularly "cheerful" nationality. As the Han Clothing devotees sitting beside me giggled in captivity, one "Mongolian" woman twirled rapidly and repeatedly pressed her body provocatively against each of the four men on stage, in step with the beat of the music. At one point, as this young lady

stood in the middle of the stage, the music came to a halt. Two “Mongolian” men were located on either side of her, bent over with their hands reaching toward the ground and their buttocks facing in her direction. Suddenly, she gave them each a lively spank as she tilted her head to the side and directed a mischievous smile at the audience. The fast-paced music then started again, as the audience clapped with joy and a flurry of flashes from digital cameras lit the stage.

The next section of the show, the Han Clothing display, maintained the same level of excitement amongst my acquaintances, yet the tone of the performance was considerably more solemn: in fact, rather than characterizing this section of the show as a “performance” (表演) like the other performances that evening, this section was described solemnly as a “ceremonial display” (禮儀展示). Set against dramatic music evoking a certain classical grandeur, the host began by saying:

This is the Han nationality, also known as the Huaxia nationality. The traditional clothing of the Han people is “Han Clothing.” From the moment that the Yellow Emperor exercised control over all under heaven through the establishment of a system of clothing and rituals, Han Clothing has been passed from one generation to the next for over four millennia. It is one of the most ancient forms of clothing in the world. Although many nowadays are unaware of Han Clothing, it has been rediscovered in recent years.

At precisely this moment, the first Han Clothing representative stepped out to a round of applause from the audience. He walked slowly and solemnly from stage left with his hands held together a few inches in front of his waist. When he reached the center of the stage, he turned dramatically to face the audience, and slowly stepped forward toward the front of the stage, his hands still folded together. Upon reaching the front of the stage, he suddenly extended his arms in both directions with a dramatic look upon his face, displaying his body in a position resembling the Chinese character 大 (meaning “great,” as in “the great Han”). He stood in this



position for a few seconds, staring into the audience which stared back at him, before he ever so slowly began turning around, with his arms still extended, to display both the front and the back of his clothing. Upon completing this turn, he stared toward the audience again, brought his hands together in front of his chest, and bowed slowly. Gradually rising from his bow, he lowered his hands to his waist, turned and walked slowly to the back of the stage. This process was repeated a number of times, as various members of the local Han Clothing Movement displayed their clothing styles and the narrator explained the arcane name and significance of each type.



**Figure 6- The Han's "ceremonial display," Chinese Nationalities' Culture Festival, Jinan University, Guangzhou, November 2010**

The narrator concluded the dramatic display with a correspondingly dramatic closing:

Han Clothing is not just some retro style. Rather, we are on a search: a search for the beauty of our national clothing, a search for our lost civilization, and a search for a prosperity that was once ours. On today's grand world stage, we hope that our ancient civilization will be able to again illuminate the world with its glory- because we are eternally descendants of the dragon.

The show concluded on this note of illumination and glory from the self-proclaimed descendants of the dragon. As yet another group of Han dressed as ethnic minorities appeared on stage for yet another round of lively singing and dancing, the Han Clothing activists sitting with me began shuffling in their seats. Just as quickly as this performance had begun, it had ended. And before the next song concluded, everyone in my party had stood to leave, and was eager for me to do the same; for once, after all, they had come not to see the minorities' performances, but rather to see the Han ceremonial display.

The discrepancy between the performances that evening, a discrepancy which reflects the benefits and risks of this majority movement's will to ethnicization, immediately reminded me of an unexpected monologue by a then-senior figure in the Guangzhou Han Clothing Association on the history of the world and the role of "shaking" (搖) therein, which I had heard one afternoon a few weeks earlier. Drifting to the topic of "the races" as conversations at Han Clothing gatherings often did, my interlocutor had first asserted that the history of the world was the history of the races striving to develop the world and humankind: this was precisely the type of seemingly deep but ultimately vapid and at times disconcerting statement that often characterized weekend philosophizing at Han Clothing events. Yet there was one exception to this historical rule, she claimed: "the blacks" (黑人) in Africa, who supposedly spent their time

“shaking” and dancing in circles. These Africans like percussion because they are simple people, she told me, similar to China’s minorities but completely unlike the Han, who developed rituals and played more sophisticated and subtle instruments like the *guqin* (古琴). Drums, she emphasized, are much louder and rougher than the *guqin*, a fact which she interpreted as reflecting upon the character of the two “races” which she was comparing. Eventually, she says, the “blacks” brought their “shaking” to the United States, where they created “shaking and rolling music” (搖滾音樂), better known as rock & roll. This shaking was contagious, she told me: it first corrupted “white” American culture (美國白人文化), and eventually spread around the world through American cultural imperialism. And now the whole world was shaking... with just one exception, namely the Han. “We Han don’t rock/ shake (搖),” she told me with a contented smile on her face. “We do rituals.”

Despite the obviously misguided foundations of this cultural-racial narrative of history, these comments nevertheless accurately portray a fundamental truth of Han nationalist views of the self and others, also demonstrated in the discrepancy between performances at the Nationalities Culture Festival. While members of the Han Clothing Movement want to join in the ethnic party and to be placed on display alongside the other nationalities with ethnicity and tradition, proponents are still avidly determined to maintain their imagined difference and presumed superiority as the sole representative of the “real China.” This is a role which, in their minds, requires a high degree of sophistication and decorum. The performance described above is an excellent example of ethnicization, borrowing representational motifs from China’s state-defined minorities to make “Han-ness” tangible and enjoyable. The Han now have their clothing and traditions, embodying Han-ness as a stable, homogeneous, and eternal trait, and their

performance, aestheticizing the Han through elaborate and colorful costumes and grandiose movements.

Yet insofar as movement participants now have their own Han ethnicity and their tradition, having developed this image from the ethnic model of minority nationalities, the Han faces the potential risk of being thought of as “ethnic” in the original sense of the term, a problematic situation for a majority-supremacist movement. Just like any form of transference, the ambivalent relationship produced by ethnic transference thus generates a number of defense mechanisms to re-differentiate the “ethnicized” Han from their fellow nationalities: the “distinction between Chinese and barbarians” (華夷之辨) is thus a central and indeed compulsive component of movement rhetoric, expressed all too anxiously and compulsively. So, while minorities “dance,” Han engage in what is referred to as a “ceremonial display” or “ritual.” Whereas minorities’ performances consisted of fast-paced music, rapid twirls, and sexual innuendoes, the Han’s display consisted of dramatic music, right angles and grand gestures, and displays of etiquette. Whereas the peak of the Mongolian performance featured a woman joyfully smacking the buttocks of two men, the Han Clothing set featured a series of considerably less bawdy mini-peaks in which individual members of the Han would stand before the audience and extend the limbs of their body on grand display, appropriately in the shape of the character “great.” Throughout these performances, while minorities’ bodies moved rapidly and seemingly uncontrollably (“shaking”), Han bodies moved slowly with constant composure and control (“not shaking”) in their “ceremonial display,” symbolically representing the presumed characters of the nationalities at hand in the eyes of their performers and audience: the Han. And while

minorities' links to the past are derived from their "simple" or "primitive" nature, the Han's links to the past are signs of its "civilized" and "great" essence.

By becoming ethnic with clothing, customs, traditions, and performances, enthusiasts reconstruct the standard and bland image of the Han, adding a new dimension of ethnic enjoyment and national fantasy. Yet alongside this becoming ethnic, there is a continued emphasis upon differentiation from the ambivalent identification with ethnicity through the idea of "China" and thus civilization, to maintain the majority's elevated status as the sole representative of a longstanding civilization. This combination articulates enjoyable ethnicity while maintaining imagined superiority, producing a vision of Han-ness which is central to the Han Clothing Movement, and which I call "having one's Han and enjoying it too."

## **Conclusion**

The issue of enjoyment brings us to the personal motivations of Han Clothing Movement participants, which I analyze through a series of case studies in the next chapter. In the current chapter, I have focused upon the social and cultural environment that has fostered the rise of the Han Clothing movement, finding that its exaltation of Han-ness, tradition, and the "real China" is primarily a product of these ideas' opposites: minority ethnic representation, a disconcerting modernity, and the disappointing experience of the real China. Majority identity, modernity, and nationalism each encompass self-defeating paradoxes, from banality to anxieties to disappointing realities, which contradict their self-celebratory imaginaries in actual experience. The Han Clothing Movement's exaltation of an eternal "Han-ness," tradition, and "the real China" is then

a symptom of contemporary tensions within ethnic structures, social processes, and national imaginings; yet at the same time, it provides a fleeting and elusive cure to these tensions through the creation of an alternative imaginary world untroubled by the limitations of the present. In the next chapter, through a series of case studies of movement participants, I will similarly demonstrate that the roots of enthusiasm surrounding the collective identity of “the Han” are to be found primarily in the self and personal experience. Highlighting the Han Clothing Movement’s status as a simultaneous symptom of and cure for these dilemmas, I demonstrate that it is precisely because “Han” is a label through which individual participants re-create and fulfill themselves that it is an object of fascination, but it is also precisely through this collective fascination that these acts of re-creation and fulfillment are viewed as natural embodiments of an otherwise unrealized essence, producing an imaginary identity which is considered not only more magnificent than oneself, but also more truly oneself than oneself.

## Chapter 4

### The Personal Origins of Collective Identity

What could be personal about the Han Clothing Movement? Upon first inspection, the movement is organized around such unabashedly collective ideals as Han-ness, cultural tradition, and the Chinese nation. Yet despite its homogenizing rhetoric, I argue that the Han Clothing Movement is first and foremost composed of and enacted by individuals. And although the movement's ideals and the contradictions that they produce in practice can be analyzed at a macro-level, in the end, they are only experienced at a personal level. Thus, in the present chapter, I aim to expand upon the sociocultural analysis of the movement developed in the preceding chapter by considering the personal experiences of movement participants trapped within these contradictions of Han-ness. Towards these ends, I employ a series of case studies to demonstrate that the Han Clothing Movement is at once a symptom of participants' situations as well as a temporary and illusory cure for individuals: a symbolic sacred canopy (cf. Berger 1967) of personal meaning, certainty, and dignity in a world in which these characteristics are all too often lacking.

By employing five case studies of movement participants, I also aim to draw upon and contribute to anthropological analyses of the ways in which cultural institutions, practices, and ideas can produce, express, and realize personal desires. In his study of Sri Lankan religious devotees, Gananath Obeyesekere bases his analysis of symbolic behavior (particularly matted hair and other ascetic practices) upon a consideration of the social and psychological experiences of his informants. Obeyesekere characterizes informants as expressing internal dilemmas through pre-existing cultural "myth models," thereby making states of internal distress culturally

communicable: symbols' most powerful meanings are then located within the experiences and often unconscious thought processes of those deploying them (Obeyesekere 1981). In his analysis of the tale of Nezha from *Fengshen Yanyi*, Steven Sangren argues that this myth expresses a "narcissistic fantasy of radical autonomy or omnipotence" produced in and sustained by the individual's interactions, accommodations, and tensions with the social system of Chinese patriliney (Sangren 2000:200). Elsewhere, Sangren traces the relationship between desire and social institutions in an analysis of the patrilineal family in China as produced and reproduced in the form of an "instituted fantasy" which at once expresses and generates desire (Sangren 2009:264; Sangren 2013). From another perspective, Peter Berger analyzes religious thought as a "sacred canopy" at once constructed, reified, and alienated by humans as a means of endowing all of existence, including even its most incomprehensible aspects, with transcendent meaning (Berger 1967:28, 89). Bruce Kapferer's ethnography of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka demonstrates the role of nationalism and national mythology and legends as seemingly fulfilling cosmic guides in moments of extreme crisis (Kapferer 1988). And finally, Peter Sloterdijk's ambitious study of "spheres" characterizes cultural products as symbolic shells or immune systems which fleetingly protect humans from anxieties and perceived threats. Their instability and uncertainty, ascribed to their imaginary nature and the resulting inescapability of the original existential anxieties and threats, means that the construction of these shells is a never-ending process, or indeed the main activity of culture (Sloterdijk 2005; Sloterdijk 2011).

Despite the vast differences in these examples drawn from ritual, myth, religion, family life, and culture in general, a common theme can be deciphered, wherein human beings attempt to express and alleviate desires and lacks through personal investments in sociocultural entities and images. Yet at the same time, these desires are never satiated. Based in this theory of culture



as an instituted fantasy produced and reproduced by personal desires (cf. Sangren 2013), this chapter examines the personal backgrounds and lives of Han Clothing Movement participants to illuminate the lacks, anxieties, and uncertainties that they face on a daily basis. In the sections that follow, the in-depth recounting of these personal experiences is juxtaposed with corresponding images of ethnicity and tradition drawn from my research, to highlight the ways in which the fantasies of the Han Clothing Movement appeal to individuals in the disenchanted present. Through these analyses, we can see that just as the movement's image of Han-ness passes through minority representation, constructions of the past are based in the present, and the "real" China becomes an imaginary inversion of the real China, so the collective ideals of the Han Clothing Movement and its Han identity are products and expressions, not of an intrinsic cultural essence or eternal tradition, but rather of personal desires and aspirations in the present.

## **I. Liang**

I first met Liang at a Chinese New Year gathering in Shenzhen. Along with his Han Clothing, he carried with him a small drum with the traditional character for "Han" painted on its skin, which he proudly displayed to curious onlookers. Liang is a resident of the remote outskirts of Shenzhen in his late twenties who makes the hour-long journey into the center of the city on a regular basis to bask in the glory of imagined Han-ness. Back at his countryside home, he works as a security guard in a residential community, a job which requires that he patrol his quiet community to make sure that nothing illegal or untoward is happening. The main problem in Liang's countryside community, however, is not that something illegal might happen. The problem, instead, is that nothing ever happens. He thus described his job as pointless, boring, and

providing meager pay: as he told me humorously on a number of occasions, “I don’t have much besides time.”

I accompanied Liang over three days at work at the beginning of spring in 2011. Beginning the day early in the square in the center of the community, I sat on a bench looking around while the two members of security on call, one of whom was Liang’s supervisor, spent the morning playing extremely animated games of cards, vigorously chain smoking, and then suddenly crashing and taking naps on the back of pedicabs. My eyes, often the only two actually paying any attention to happenings within the community, did not notice anything of particular concern, or even of particular interest, throughout the morning. Then, when ten o’clock arrived, Liang informed me that it was time to “make the rounds.” I followed him with interest through some narrow alleyways on the perimeter of the community, hoping that we might come across something, indeed anything, of interest. That moment of interest arrived quite unexpectedly, however, when Liang stopped at a stand to pick up a bottle of 110-proof *baijiu* liquor. Considering that this is a drink that is difficult to consume at ten in the evening, I had honestly never considered consuming it at ten in the morning, but Liang either failed to notice my surprise, or completely disregarded it. We promptly proceeded down a side alleyway, where Liang reassured me “my supervisor can’t see us here” as he handed me a flimsy plastic cup and proceeded to fill it with the toxic-smelling concoction that was about to give us both a profoundly numbing start to an otherwise not particularly memorable day. Like two teenagers sneaking a cigarette around the corner from school, we sat in the alley talking and drinking for almost an hour, as Liang told me that this spot provided a daily break from the tedious boredom of his work. Liquor was not always the sole source of distraction, he reassured me; sometimes it was comic books, or friends, or some combination of the three. As we wandered back towards

the center of the community block, Liang's supervisor was in the midst of a particularly heated card game, and either completely failed to notice our intoxication or did not particularly care. The latter is indeed most likely, considering that he did not even bother to ask how our rounds had gone. We then broke for an early lunch, which was limited in terms of food selection yet quite abundant in terms of the provision of liquor. Thankfully, my notes remained intelligible. The rest of the day passed uneventfully: and undoubtedly many more days followed in this manner.

Liang's unique approach to escapism at work clearly alleviated the boredom of a mundane or, in his words "pointless," job. However, it was unable to alleviate the boredom of his life outside of work. Liang was still single in his late twenties, a situation of concern in Chinese culture, wherein pressure to delay dating in the course of one's education is ironically followed almost immediately by unrelenting pressure to find a partner, marry, and produce children. Pragmatically speaking, Liang's single status was likely closely linked to his job's low salary, which also left him with no choice but to live at his parent's house on the semi-rural edge of the bustling city of Shenzhen: a situation unlikely to win over the hearts of many bachelorettes. Many of his friends and family expressed puzzlement at his failure to "dive into the sea" of entrepreneurship downtown, find a wife, and produce children, the standard narrative for a man of his age. Liang's mother had arranged a number of blind dates with local women which never quite succeeded: "all they care about is money," Liang told me, "and I don't have much of that." His elder brother, who had already proceeded to his second marriage and hence second child, took on a generally condescending and even mocking tone in most conversations that I observed with Liang. As his brother and his friends acquired the markers of success and moved beyond the boredom of daily life in the countryside toward the excitement of the city beyond, Liang's life

remained removed from the ideal image for someone his age. In a world without any clear direction or fulfillment, Liang sought meaning and fulfillment elsewhere, and found it in the Han Clothing Movement.

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Such sought after meaning was on clear display in the summer of 2011, when I visited the Yunnan Nationalities Park with three members of the Kunming Han Clothing Association, each of whom told me that they had visited the park “countless times.” A cornerstone of ethnic imaginings in the reform era, the Kunming Nationalities Park is dedicated to the kitschy representation of China’s minority nationalities, permitting visitors a chance to inspect their living environments and, predictably, to watch them dance. In the Mosuo (Na) section of the park, we were invited into a “typical” Mosuo household in which we were purportedly able to glimpse the real lives of these exoticized figures. The centerpiece of the display was composed of a number of such mundanely common household items (生活用品, rendered in the signs as “daily-use articles”) as spoons and pots. Yet unlike a regular house such as Liang’s, in which such common items would be placed on the range, in the sink, or in the cabinets, within this veritable living museum of the mysterious minority lifestyle, these otherwise mundane household items were placed on prominent display on the wall and labeled accordingly.



**Figure 7- The household items of a Mosuo family, affixed to the wall and labeled, along with a close-up of the sign designating “daily-use articles,” whereby the mundane is made special. Kunming Nationalities Park, Kunming, June 2011.**

Even the most banal of items thereby take on a mystical aura, and the most burdensome of daily chores, from cooking to cleaning, become objects of fascination. The average Mosuo family, according to this portrayal, lives not within a regular abode in which mundane chores and tasks pile on top of one another as the days pass, but rather within a museum of the self in which everything becomes a cultural artifact and appears to have a deeper layer of significance.

Twelve hours north by train from Kunming, in the Dali region's Xizhou Village, there is a tourist attraction known as the Bai Nationality Cultural Center. For 50 RMB per person, guests are granted a whirlwind tour of Bai lives, invested with seemingly constant joy and unrivaled symbolic significance. Visitors are first predictably shown a performance of minority dances: as the audience trains their camera lenses upon the young women cavorting before their eyes, the master of ceremonies explains the deep symbolic meaning of each dance, purportedly passed down from one generation to the next, completely unchanged. Visitors are then whisked away to the Bai nationality's renowned "three-course tea ceremony" (三道茶),<sup>16</sup> an invented tradition for tourism purposes (Notar 2006) that is characterized as an ancient Bai custom for greeting guests. Visitors sample three symbolically laden courses of tea: the first tea is somewhat bitter, while the second is sweeter, and the third leaves a slight aftertaste in one's mouth. The somewhat trite and highly predictable symbolism behind this arrangement suggested that sweetness follows bitterness in life, while the lingering aftertaste of the final tea was supposed to resemble the lingering memories of one's visit to the Dali region, encouraging one's return. The actual meaning of such an arrangement, however, is never quite as significant as the simple presence of meaning in and of itself: many of my fellow travelers seemed quite impressed at the sudden depth of this everyday experience of drinking tea. This was in their eyes, however, the way that life had been from time immemorial for the Bai: unchanging, stable, and full of meaning. We had come a long way from sitting at the center of a residential community, passing interminable and seemingly meaningless days, experiencing the joy of ethnicization that is reenacted in the representation of the Han, and by extension the self, in the Han Clothing Movement.

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, I encountered a similar ceremony at a Han traditional culture education center in downtown Chengdu, where it was referred to as a "Confucian tea ceremony." Perhaps not coincidentally, this Confucian tea ceremony included a far more expansive six courses of tea, exactly double the amount in the Bai nationality tea ceremony.

## II. Yan

Yan was one of the first Han Clothing enthusiasts whom I came to know on a close personal basis. She had been kind enough to offer to meet at a café near Sun Yat-sen University to discuss Han Clothing early in the course of my research. Arriving an hour and a half behind schedule in full Han regalia, her elaborate outfit contrasted almost immediately with her otherwise quite haphazard personal style. Unlike Liang, Yan could not exactly be described as “single,” although she also could not exactly be described as committed. Over the course of my research, she had passionate romances and equally passionate break-ups with a series of potential suitors, and was certainly never shy about discussing her love-life at quite random moments. One minute we would be discussing the differences between various types of Han Clothing, and the next minute she would be telling me suddenly about how she was head over heels in love with a successful man who was also in love with her, but that for some reason they also yelled and fought quite often. Then, at our next meeting, she would tell me how unreliable and incompetent her last boyfriend had been, but how thoughtful and caring a new suitor was: I was naturally never quite sure what to make of these stories, but she seemed no less perplexed. Approaching her upper twenties, Yan essentially faced the same problem as Liang, the dilemma of being single and not particularly economically successful. As mentioned above, remaining single into one’s late twenties in China undoubtedly creates comments and pressure from family and friends for men; yet in the case of women, this perceived “condition” all too often produces an impending sense of emergency. The cult of female youth and virginity renders unmarried thirty-year-old women as “*sheng-nü*” (剩女) which is generally translated as “leftover women,” but

could also be read considerably more harshly as “female leftovers.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Yan’s relationship to her single status was far less detached and far more tumultuous than Liang’s, moving from one potentially promising yet uncertain relationship to another, in search of a solution that never arrived.

Alongside her rocky love life, Yan’s business life could not be described as any more stable. A college graduate with relatively strong English skills, she worked as a shift supervisor in a factory on the edge of the city. However, her position and salary clearly did not meet her expectations, and her mind typically raced from one eccentric business idea to another over the year that I knew her. She memorably began one meeting by asking directly, before I had sat down, “how many American women do you know?” Puzzled and unable to determine an exact figure, I assured her that I knew quite a few “American women.” She then leaned in towards me to ask a follow-up question: amongst these women whom I knew, how many were “white, black, Indian, or Mexican?” Only increasingly puzzled, I responded that I would have to think about that question for a little while, and asked why she was curious. It turned out that Yan was planning to manufacture Han-themed change pouches, which she then wanted to sell on eBay to “Americans” at a decent profit. However, she was not sure of the demand for such items, and asked me to contact all of the “whites, blacks, Indians, and Mexicans” that I knew to see if they might be interested, and to determine which ethnic group would be most interested. Asking why she had not included Asians, she sighed, dramatically rolled her eyes, and not so patiently reported to me it was all too obvious that naturally Asians would be interested in such merchandise. I never managed to conduct Yan’s suggested survey of “American women.” But

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<sup>17</sup> I propose this translation in light of the proximity of this term to *shengcai* (剩菜) or *shengfan* (剩飯), the word for culinary leftovers. The term “female leftovers” thus seems to more accurately render the abrasiveness of the original Chinese saying.



thankfully, the next time that I met her, she had moved on to greater goals and aspirations. This time, she wanted to sell what she called “Han-style jackets,” which she would have the workers under her supervision produce en masse for the American market.

I was never able to decipher whether Yan’s business life was modeled upon her love life, or vice versa, or if perhaps both were products of her uniquely insistent yet inconsistent personality. But whatever the cause may have been, her ideal life appeared always almost within her grasp yet continually beyond her reach. In a world without stability and order, as she moved from one initially promising yet ultimately uncertain situation to another, Yan naturally yearned for an elusive order and certainty, and found it in the Han Clothing Movement.

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Alongside the mystical splendor and meaning encompassing even the most banal of items, visitors to the Kunming Nationalities Park and the Bai Nationality Culture Center are also treated to one dance performance after another, which present life as a constant and well organized celebration. Anyone who has viewed a nationalities show in China is immediately familiar with this genre, performed by apparently fun-loving minority figures in elaborate costumes surrounded by carefully constructed settings that create a feeling of being closer to nature. There is inevitably, somewhere within the performance, a male and female pairing of dancers, whose dance overflows with suggestive sensuality to the giggles of spectators, as seen in the Mongolian dance described in the previous chapter. Viewers of these dances are left to see how “those people,” precisely on account of their presumed lack of sophistication, have a much easier life: they seemingly have no need for jobs, appear to spend most of their time intoxicated, and specialize in dancing and courting. Sometimes, as I observed in the Bai Village at the Kunming



**Figure 8- Bai minority dance performance, Xizhou, Yunnan, July 2011**

Nationalities Park, the performers' mutual courting even evolves smoothly into a impromptu marriage proposal and ceremony, enacting for viewers the extraordinary and seemingly non-stop festival that is imagined minority life, filled with spontaneous and successful love, carefree celebration, and of course dancing.

Yet even more revealing than these typical components of minority representation is the similarly standardized yet superficially impromptu invitation for a member of the audience to join in the dance: whether one has visited a nationalities' theme park or an ethnic-themed restaurant, the invitation to join in the festivities onstage is an unavoidable part of the process,

which is nevertheless portrayed as completely unplanned. The invitation is inevitably met with a mixture of excitement and embarrassed hesitation as mostly Han tourists are brought onto stage in order to have a taste of “how the ethnics do it.” According to the standard formula observed throughout a lengthy series of such performances over the course of my fieldwork, a few spectators are first brought onstage, usually to dance somewhat awkwardly to the amusement of performers and fellow audience members. After this first group returns to their seats, a single man from the audience is brought onstage, and attempts are made to teach him how to dance and thereby court one of the minority women: he is invariably refused, to the great amusement of the audience.

Participants are inevitably pulled upon onto stage with a look of shyness and embarrassed hesitation but also with a massive smile. It is a rare moment for “the Han” to enjoy these things, free from the other concerns that accompany their modern and unmarked life: the feigned hesitancy to participate and the resounding applause and giggles accompanying any such performance testify to the ambivalent power of this ethnic spectacle. It is as if Han spectators eagerly desire to join in the ethnic celebration, yet because they are burdened with their modern responsibilities, they remain unable to take on fully the ethnic movements and demeanors of the far more versatile minorities. Han Clothing transcends this ethnic binary that is fleetingly crossed but never fully overcome in such ethnic performances, producing a similar ethnic essence that provides characteristics, customs, order, certainty, and seemingly eternal and enjoyable meaning beyond the uncertainties and pressures of the modern city life in which movement participants dwell.

### III. Yu

Yu is a network technician from rural Shandong Province, currently residing in the Pearl River Delta. We met a number of times over dinner during the course of my research, usually at a toxically spicy Chongqing-style hot pot restaurant near his apartment. We would order six beers at a time, and after a few rounds, Yu reliably became the most talkative and animated of any of my interlocutors.

Yu moved to the south from Shandong at the age of 16 to earn money for his family. Despite living in the region for over a decade, his heart remains elsewhere, intertwined in a dual nostalgia for the distant Shandong countryside and an even more distant imagined past. Despite the growth and excitement unfolding all around him, he told me on a number of occasions that he was disappointed. Nothing, he said, could be as impressive as the memories that he had from his childhood in the countryside. He recounted Chinese New Year celebrations from his youth, noting that although food and entertainment were simple, the celebrations had the feeling of being a genuine festival. And despite the glitz and extravagance that can often go into Chinese New Year celebrations nowadays, he told me that it never feels quite like a real Chinese New Year celebration. It is as if something is missing, he said. The same applied to contemporary urban life as a whole. Behind the flashing lights and fancy cars, he told me, everything just seems less powerful and less impressive nowadays. Yu's only goal is thus to make enough money in the city to return home to his village in Shandong, where he believes that he will have a chance to live in peace and quiet again.

No one lived in greater peace and quiet, Yu repeatedly emphasized during our discussions, than his Han ancestors. He was certain that life was perpetually wonderful prior to

the arrival of the Mongols and the Manchus in the later imperial era. The “non-Han”<sup>18</sup> Yuan and Qing dynasties’ failure, in Yu’s opinion, to absorb and protect Han Chinese culture was the equivalent of Adam eating the apple in the Garden of Eden: it produced a downfall from which the Chinese people have been striving to recover ever since. Prior to this tragedy, life was positively charmed. The ancestors understood things that even we nowadays, with our extravagant lifestyles and seemingly advanced science and technology, are unable to grasp. Noting that I was planning to write a book about my research, Yu recounted to me how, in the imperial era, some scholars would spend their entire lives working on one single volume, and might not even live to see it to completion. He contrasted this approach to life with the expansive proliferation of publications a few blocks down the street at Guangzhou Book City, a seven-story mega-bookstore: “in the past, people would work their entire lives to ensure that they wrote one worthwhile book. In the present, people come out with one book after another, but not a single one of them is worth even skimming, much less passing down to the next generation.” Never straying far from his nostalgia, Yu enthusiastically recounted all types of intricate historical facts and myths, as if he was preparing for a game of Imperial Chinese Trivial Pursuit: he can literally talk for hours about the origins of Han national rituals with the Great Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the ancestral tree extending down from the Yellow Emperor to today’s Han nationality, and even, memorably, the filial origins of tofu, created by a loving son for his aging and toothless mother.

Yu’s dual nostalgia for a time and place that he never experienced, and for a time and place that he experienced but can never recapture, signals a dual alienation both from the urban

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<sup>18</sup> I do not use “non-Han” here as a historically accurate description. Rather, I use it solely to reflect how Yu characterized these dynasties. Naturally, this projection of Han backwards into time is an anachronistic simplification of ethnicity and ethnic relations in pre-modern China.

environment as well as the stresses of the present. Although he yearns to return to Shandong, and expressed his yearning frequently through the narration of childhood celebrations of the Chinese New Year, his home today is not as welcoming: he has been unable to visit his family over the Chinese New Year in recent years, because his father told him not to return until he had found “a woman.” Although Yu has developed quite a successful career in network technology, he told me one night after too many drinks that he feels that he is a complete failure: he has repeatedly failed to find a steady companion, and despite his managerial position in his department, does not earn a high enough salary to truly win his family’s respect. His yearning for the “real Han” and by extension the “real China” is not only a search for an abstract and romanticized ideal, but also a search for a time and place in which these problems would not be present.

In a memorable exchange one evening, Yu asked me, as someone who has spent years in China, what advice I might have for the country: “what could we improve?” Having been asked this question countless times, and noticing that no one is ever particularly happy with any answer that I provide, I tried at first to dodge the question, safely suggesting that any problems that the Chinese people faced would be resolved by the Chinese people, not by me. Yet Yu insisted. Expecting a sympathetic audience from a network technician, I opened up and told Yu about how my email had been inaccessible without a virtual private network since my arrival in China the previous year, and suggested that the ever-expanding controls on the Internet and other media should perhaps be relaxed to allow free discussion of the problems in contemporary society. When I finished, Yu paused, took a deep breath, and then proceeded on a lengthy and visibly angry monologue telling me exactly why I was wrong and why everything that I had discussed in my response was simply none of my business, confirming my initial hesitation.

Yu proceeded to inform me that there were “riots” in Tibet in 2008, and that the Western media played a dangerous game by spreading rumors and flat-out lies throughout these events. The one and only real truth, he told me, is that the Tibetans were making trouble and attacking innocent Han. These Tibetans and Uyghurs and other minorities want to be independent, he told me, but this is thoroughly impractical. “They can’t even take care of their own economy and economic development, and they want to be independent? What kind of a country would that be?” The Han Chinese, he told me, are thus in Tibet only to do good: in a reincarnation of the civilization/ barbarian divide of classical times under a developmentalist guise, Yu sees the Han central government altruistically funneling money into an underdeveloped region whose people simply do not know how to take care of themselves. Yet the “Western media” misrepresented the Chinese people’s sincere and well-intentioned efforts to help these helplessly simple people, characterizing their goodwill mission as an invasion. On account of such misrepresentations, Yu argued, he believed the state had the right to block whatever websites it would like.

Of course, in reality, the Great Firewall which blocks websites originated long before 2008, but logical and accurate argumentation was obviously not Yu’s main objective that evening. At one ominous point in our exchange about Tibet, he leaned in to say earnestly, “let me tell you, this is just my own opinion. I’m not a leader, I’m just me. But if I was the leader, I would gather up all of those people who rioted in Tibet and Xinjiang, and I would execute them. Shoot them (槍斃)! Problem solved.” Fascinated at Yu’s tirade, I no longer regretted having answered his question honestly.

Unwilling to let his capital punishment comment stand as the strangest of the night, Yu proceeded to develop a traditionalist justification of state censorship. Yu acknowledged that

censorship means that there are many things about which average people are unaware, but that this is not a problem. Citing the five principal relationships of Confucianism, he suggested that there are different levels of people, and that those on the bottom must obey those above them. For example, he pointed out, a son must obey his father, just as he has obeyed his father's order to never return home without "a woman." Within these relationships of superior to subordinate which facilitate the smooth functioning of society, he highlighted the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. There is heaven, and there are the people, he told me, and between them is the son of heaven. People are unable to communicate with heaven, because they are too far removed from this transcendent power. Only the son of heaven can communicate with heaven. And then, looking me straight in the eye, he declared in all seriousness that "Hu Jintao is the son of heaven (胡錦濤就是天子)." There were many issues that in his mind the common people did not need to worry about, and indeed did not even need to know: the economy is growing, people's lives are getting better (despite his prior claims to the contrary), and the superiors have all of the information that they need in order to make the right decisions for China. My doubts about censorship, he concluded, were simply the result of my lack of knowledge of Chinese culture. "You still don't understand China" (你還是不了解中國), he said with a smile, and took another long sip of his beer.

I was not fully convinced that Yu really believed what he had told me that evening. His framework seemed to be more of a tortured yet traditionalized rationalization of a system that one knows that one cannot change and in which one has no choice but to continue living. Faced with this situation, Yu had made an important choice: his dedication to Han Clothing, which he was certain could bring everyone beyond the conundrums of the present. Yu reassured me later



that evening, after a few more drinks, that one day everyone would wear Han Clothing, and that these Internet restrictions and other forms of censorship would become obsolete: that moment, he asserted, would mark the true rise of China as a great power, or the realization of the “real China.”

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The charms of ethnicization described in previous sections are further enhanced within the Han Clothing Movement imaginary through the celebration of a longstanding and powerful tradition. Recounting his life in Shandong, Yu once told me of a simple cure for the common cold that his mother provided for him when he was a young boy. Supposedly, his mother would pick two blades of some sort of herb from their garden- he was unsure of precisely what type of herb it was- place the blades in a pot and boil them with water. He said that it would cook for a little while, and then his mother would bring the pot to him and have him drink it down to the last drop. Upon swallowing that last drop, he said, his cold would immediately disappear.

This cure, he told me, not only symbolized the unrivaled power of traditional Chinese medicine. At the same time, he emphasized, it also symbolized the power of the family in traditional China. This was a cure that Yu claimed had been passed down from generation to generation within families for millennia. Yet somehow, in the past two decades, Yu asserted that it had been lost. Nowadays, he emphasized, families are divided, and barely anyone lives in the countryside. The few who do reside there are usually either older people or children. There is then no one to tend the herb gardens, so this simple wisdom discovered millennia past is gone. Instead, people nowadays only know how to eat “Western medicines” like Tylenol, which he told me failed to resolve anything, and only make matters worse. From personal health to family

life, modern society was a degradation of the past, wherein even the irresolvable dilemma of the common cold had been resolved millennia before. Yu, however, believed these dilemmas could be resolved again, through the Han Clothing Movement.

#### **IV. Tsin**

Arriving in Guangzhou late on a humid August evening, after nearly two days on the road from New York to Guangzhou via Beijing, I made my way through the both stunning and stunningly quiet lobby of the new hotel immediately adjacent to the city's airport. Upon checking in, I found that my room included a brand new flat-screen television, as well as a yoga mat and a yoga-centered television station designed to help weary traveling guests "relax." The shower in the bathroom featured two shower heads, with one providing an intense flow of water, and another slightly above providing a pleasant, almost rain-like feel. A plethora of pillows covered my bed, providing a relaxing night's rest, despite the jetlag.

At the exact moments that I was enjoying this luxurious rest, one of my future informants on the other side of town watched as residents of her community were sprayed with tear gas and randomly beaten by police. Tsin Village (洗村) was once a rural area on the edge of the city of Guangzhou, where the sole industry was agriculture. However, like many rural areas across China over the past twenty years (Friedmann 2005), Tsin Village has gradually been surrounded by the ever expanding city of Guangzhou, such that this "village" is now located directly in the center of the new downtown, known as Pearl River New City. As this area became surrounded by urban life, it came to be known as an "urban village" (城中村), a makeshift and completely unplanned collection of three to four-story apartment buildings along surprisingly narrow alleys,

usually housing migrant workers who have come to labor in Guangzhou's often equally makeshift factories. The result of this urban village buildup in recent decades has been admittedly less than aesthetically and socially pleasing (Yao 2008), with narrow cramped alleys, personally installed power lines that looked very unsafe, scores of wandering rodents, and seemingly irresolvable issues of crime. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to describe Tsin Village as a slum. Nevertheless, the space has provided housing opportunities for the backbone of the city's development, the poorly paid worker, in an environment in which housing has become an increasingly unbearable burden for the majority of low salary earners.

Tsin Village's location is so central that it happened to be located only three blocks north of the newly built stadium in which the 2010 Asian Games' Opening Ceremony was to be held, and just one block east of the elaborately designed walking street leading to this stadium. This awkward leftover of urban development thus suddenly became an embarrassing eyesore for the city's government, who grew eager to tear the blocks down before the start of the Asian Games in November of 2010 as part of an ambitious but often thoughtless city-wide image makeover. In policymakers' view, it seemed, a massive pile of rubble would be a more appealing sight than these makeshift slum structures: after all, as described in the first chapter, the "People's Games" are always easier without the people. In their eagerness to erase this seeming blight upon the city's image, the municipal government had found the perfect partner in the Tsin Village Real Estate Company, which is responsible for "real estate development" in the area, and which is also owned, in true oligarchic style, by the village chief, Lu Huigeng. Since 1978, Lu has used his dual public (governmental) and semi-private (real estate) positions to great fiscal advantage, selling land and tearing down residential blocks in the area to build brand new overpriced high-rises. So when it came time to "develop" the cramped central blocks of what was left of Tsin



**Figure 9- Demolition in Tsin Village, with its future in the background, January 2011**

Village, erasing the last vestiges of its past for yet another round of expensive apartment buildings, Lu became just as eager as the municipal government to ensure that the demolition would proceed smoothly. And by preparing a compensation package for demolished houses that was far below market value, Luo ensured that he and his accomplices would yet again earn exorbitant profits from the forced demolition of homes.

The sole complication in this plan was that the compensation provided was so meager that residents would never be able to live anywhere near downtown Guangzhou in the future, and

would barely even be able to purchase a home in the new countryside an hour away. Beginning in the summer of 2009, village residents unhappy with the compensation repeatedly gathered outside of the offices of the Tsin Village Real Estate Company, petitioned the district government, municipal government, and provincial government, hired a lawyer to represent their interests, and attempted to raise awareness of their situation through the Hong Kong media. On the evening of August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010, exactly three months to the day before the opening ceremonies of the Asian Games were to be held a few blocks away, residents had gathered in the village market in protest. Soon, a phalanx of riot police and demolition workers surrounded the village with helmets, protective shields, and weapons. Charging in, the police beat residents with batons, and chased protestors through the winding alleyways of the village, detaining dozens (Yu 2010). By three in the morning on August 13<sup>th</sup>, the police released a series of gas canisters in the area of the village market to partially clear the area: moments later, a bulldozer pushed forward to tear down this structure, which had served as the main source of livelihood for many older village residents for two decades, but was now being declared an “illegal” and “unsafe” structure.

My informant in the village witnessed this chaos, and recounted the events to me one afternoon immediately before the start of the Asian Games. Since that terrifying night in August, she told me, the Tsin Village Real Estate Company had strived to make the village uninhabitable: after destroying the market, company workers had also proceeded to cut power lines, overturn residents’ vending stalls, demolish the village school, and even occasionally doused blankets in gasoline and set them alight in the narrow corridors of the village at night. Evacuated residences were demolished, and the rubble was left unattended, eliminating homes for people while producing new homes for an ever growing rat infestation. These unfortunate developments were hidden safely from the outside by checkpoints at the four main entrances to the village staffed by

demolition workers dressed in camouflage fatigues and checking the papers of anyone entering or exiting the village. Surrounding the village, massive iron walls that had been built around the village in the weeks following the August confrontation sheltered the village from view and also reflected the imaginary community that government officials envisioned for this space once these slums were gone, featuring houses located on rolling grassy green hills and gentlemen playing rounds of golf.



**Figure 10- Demolition surrealism in Tsin Village, Guangzhou, November 2010**

The only respite that my informant could find from this stressful and even warlike environment was in Han Clothing Movement activities, which she attended regularly. She had begun reading about Han Clothing around the time of the initial demolition orders in August of 2009, and her involvement became considerably deeper after the chaos of August 2010. She told me that she found the Han Clothing activities in such natural environments as parks or mountains on the edge of the city particularly relaxing, asserting that this was where “we Han” were meant to be. While she found these events comforting, I observed a number of times in which her outspoken critiques of the government produced notable discomfort amongst fellow Han Clothing enthusiasts, and even produced conspiracy theories that she was a Falun Gong member who had been sent to shatter the happy harmony of the movement. Despite these doubts, she continued to participate and to believe strongly in the healing power of Han Clothing and the tradition that it represents. She told me on a number of occasions that she believed that some sort of external power had taken control over government and private business, and driven them to act in a manner that she could only describe as “crazy.” There was thus a need, in her opinion, to return to real Chinese tradition, so that people might abandon the blind pursuit of ever greater wealth at any cost, and might treat each other like people again. “We have five millennia of history, but when has anything like this ever happened in the past? Today, there are hundreds of thousands of people like us across the country, just trying to live peacefully in our homes, and they want to take our homes away and rob us.” She continued, comparing the present situation to the past: “There used to be morals and values and respect for one another. There used to be a heavenly way (天道). But now that’s all gone. Whoever is most powerful gets whatever they want.”



Of course, in reality, the past was considerably more complicated than she portrayed. While she appropriated an ideal image of the true Chinese past in which these types of abuses would not occur, the Tsin Village Real Estate Company and government were similarly envisioning a past in which such abuses would be actively accepted and thoroughly uncontested by an obedient citizenry. Signs attached to one wall at the edge of the village in the fall of 2011 featured an image of a smiling Buddha with arms outstretched, which read “sign the contract early and be relocated early. Make filiality a priority.”



**Figure 11- Tradition and demolition in Tsin Village, Guangzhou, Fall 2011 (From the Pandageography blog, [blog.sina.com.cn/pandageography](http://blog.sina.com.cn/pandageography))**

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The notion of the “heavenly way” (天道) and the “kingly way” (王道) play a central role in the Han Clothing Movement as an affirmation of Han identity and its inextricable ties with the Chinese state. However, unlike the majority of mainstream nationalism in China, Han Clothing Movement narratives are not constructed solely for the purpose of simplistically rationalizing



each and every action of the current government. In discussions with movement participants, issues of corruption, unaccountability, lack of transparency, and the arbitrary exercise of power were not topics from which enthusiasts shied away, even in discussions with a “foreigner.” However, this negative identity in the present was tied to a resolutely positive identity derived from the past. Drawing upon these ideas of the “heavenly way” and the “kingly way,” movement participants envisioned a distant past, unrestrained by experiential realities, in which there was a true unity and harmony between rulers and ruled, or, in more classical sounding phrasing, between “heaven” and “earth.” From the Yellow Emperor through the Song Dynasty (along with the Ming), Movement enthusiasts envisioned rulers that were at once larger than life yet also close to the people, realizing superhuman feats through dedication to the most common of values: benevolence, filiality, and respect for the heavenly way. It was only with the arrival of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty and later the Manchu Qing Dynasty that this all-encompassing harmonious sphere of the past was shattered. Accordingly, in the actions of the government today, movement participants saw the “savagery” of the Mongols and the Manchu. In this sense, the present could be excused away as untrue, while a seeming truth could be rediscovered in the fantastic identity of Han tradition and the way of the heavens.

## **V. Xia**

I first met Xia, who comes from the Shantou region of Guangdong Province, through a friend over lunch one weekend at a pseudo-Western restaurant in central Guangzhou: the kind of place where pizzas are served with peas and carrots as toppings. Although Xia was quiet and reserved by nature, we quickly developed a strong rapport. Having heard in advance that I was a visiting scholar at Sun Yat-sen University, Xia repeatedly interjected throughout our

conversation that afternoon that she was of “low culture” (文化低), meaning that she had not received much formal education. Upon hearing her life story, I was able to understand her self-consciousness. Where she came from, she told me, people’s understanding of gender was “very backward” (好落後) and preferences leaned heavily towards sons over daughters. In her home village, a family was expected “by tradition” to have at least two sons in order to avoid becoming the laughing stock of the village. Xia’s family had three daughters in a row, of which she was the oldest, before they finally had their first son. Yet this happy resolution to her parent’s “problem” became a source of constant real-life problems for her. Once her baby brother had been born, her parents decided that they needed to save money for his education and eventual marriage: as such, Xia was told to drop out of school and work in the fields. Dropping out before completing middle school, Xia had toiled in the family’s plot for a few years before her parents proposed that she go to “the city” to make some money. The pressures that her parents had previously faced in their efforts to produce a son to secure their future were thus immediately transferred to Xia, who now had no choice but to sacrifice her own future in order to guarantee her younger brother’s.

Beginning with a series of tiring and low-paying jobs in the makeshift factories of Guangzhou’s infamously rough Kangle Village,<sup>19</sup> Xia desperately sought a reliable source of income for her parents to pass on to her younger brother. Moving to the outskirts of the city for the cheapest housing that she could find, she noticed one day that a local karaoke hall was hiring hostesses, and was even providing free room and board. The job provided her with more money

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<sup>19</sup> Like Tsin Village, Kangle (康樂) Village is also an urban village providing housing for migrant workers. One of the earliest urban villages in the city of Guangzhou, Kangle is notoriously “chaotic” (亂), home to cramped factories, a lively sex trade, and hundreds of winding alleys producing a super-urban village south of Xingang Road which extends for miles to Ke Village (客村).

to send back home, which of course made her family happy. Nevertheless, she told me that work was exhausting and that she was not satisfied with her life. For readers unfamiliar with the contemporary Chinese social context, work in karaoke hall usually involves varying degrees of sex work. Although I never broached this topic with Xia, I do know that whatever it was that she was required to do in the karaoke hall, she did not particularly enjoy it. She told me that on an average night she would work until two or three in the morning, at which point she would go back to her dormitory, take a shower and hopefully get to sleep by four o'clock. Living on-site and having no vacation time, the majority of her young adult life was beyond her control, confined to a smoky and likely quite seedy karaoke hall.

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Towards the end of my tour at the Bai Nationality Cultural Center in Xizhou, our guide brought us outside of the main building to view another mundane yet suddenly exciting item: a doorway. According to our guide, each Bai door is symbolically adorned with either a dragon or a phoenix: a doorway with a dragon at the top signals that a man is the master of the house; while a doorway with a phoenix on the top means that a woman is the master of the house. Before we stepped back inside, our tour guide furthermore informed us that the foot that one uses to step through the doorway would determine the gender of one's next child: if one's left foot goes in first, one will have a boy, and if one's right foot goes in first, one will have a girl. If, however, one jumps so that both feet land inside at the same time, one will give birth to a set of twins, one a boy and the other a girl (龍鳳胎, dragon and phoenix twins). In this moment, visitors are presented with an elusive imaginary pathway to control that which they are unable to control in their usual daily lives yet which is of the utmost concern in a one-child era: their children's sex.

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One day, when I asked Xia how she became interested in Han Clothing, she surprised me by telling me that as a young girl, she loved to wrap herself in her parents' bed sheets and sing and dance in front of a mirror, pretending that she was the type of "minority" that she had seen on television. Those carefree memories from early childhood, as she innocently danced in front of a mirror, could not be farther away from her present existence. Yet amidst the merciless vicissitudes of life, Xia was able to ever so briefly capture moments of otherwise unattainable glory through her embrace of Han Clothing. Movement activities often started at eight or nine in the morning, an immensely inconvenient time considering her late working hours; activities were also almost always located at least an hour-long cramped subway ride from her apartment. Nevertheless, she did not allow these realities, or any other realities for that matter, to impinge upon her fantasy: Xia was a frequent and lively participant in local activities, sacrificing even her already limited sleep for a chance to participate in a group that provided her with an image of a better life and an otherwise elusive sense of prestige, and for once demanded nothing in return. In a world in which she exercised no real control over her own life, Xia naturally desired a certain dignity and control that was perpetually lacking, and found this in the Han Clothing Movement.

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In his analysis of the symbolism employed by ecstatic religious devotees in Sri Lanka, Gananath Obeyesekere highlights the role of certain "socioeconomic institutions, such as the family and stratification systems" (Obeyesekere 1981:122) in producing and thus comprehending meaningful symbols. These institutions, in his interpretation, produce recurrent dilemmas within

culture over time, creating what he calls “deep motivations,” which are then essential to understanding the meanings of religious symbolism through which these deep motivations are expressed, producing an analytical framework that analyzes cultural symbols through troubled personal experiences of society. The five preceding cases, each juxtaposed with a corresponding symbol from the imaginary worlds of ethnicity and tradition, trace similarly common personal dilemmas produced by the current social situation in China and expressed through the medium of Han Clothing. In the case of Liang, trapped in a mundane job in a rural setting, a clear sense of meaning, direction, and fulfillment was lacking from his daily experience. In the case of Yan’s rocky love life and professional life, any sort of stabilizing or ordering component was lacking from her life. In the case of Yu, unable to return to home to see his family until he found a wife but deeply nostalgic for a long lost time of peace at home, a sense of incomplete success and a missing wholeness reigned over his daily routines. In the case of the resident of Tsin Village, her dwelling in an environment of terror deprived her of the most basic sense of security. And finally, in the case of Xia, trapped in a karaoke hall in the service of a toddler, the utter lack of dignity and control over her life led her, as stated above, to seek that dignity and control elsewhere. Clothing, located at the interface of the individual and society (Turner 1980), then becomes the primary medium through which these fundamentally deeper struggles are expressed.

Susan D. Blum’s provocative suggestion that “perhaps all but the highest-level cadres are subalterns” is embodied in the stories above (Blum 2001:10), with the added nuance that there are varying levels of subaltern existence between and within groups. For although each of the participants described above is a member of the “core nationality,” namely the Han nationality, they remain strangers in what is assumed to be their own land, and their presumed vanguard position on the forefront of national and civilizational development is unable to be found in their

daily experiences. As a result of this discordance, there is a desire to realize the presumed “true” identity of Han-ness lacking in daily experience, expressing the lack inherent within Han-ness as majority, while at the same time providing a symbolic cure to these dilemmas through the exercise of a proper and true Han-ness. In response to the mundane, bland, and failed realities of the present, the process of ethnicization described in the previous chapter adds ethnic characteristics, color, and dignity to one’s self image as not only “Han” but indeed, within movement narratives, the “great Han,” combining minority-like ethnic fetishism and majority chauvinism. In response to the chaotic, uncertain, and anxiety inducing experiences of the present, the exaltation of an eternal and magnificent Han tradition provides a sense of stability and certainty passed down from mythical ancestors to oneself, free from the concerns of the present. And in response to the inevitable disappointments, injustices, and outrages of the present as experienced in the reality of contemporary China, an alternative vision of an as yet unrealized “real China” reassures one that this is not how life must be, and that there are other considerably more ideal possibilities. Thus, in response to the personal anxieties and concerns experienced in the present, the Han Clothing Movement allows participants to imagine and eventually reenact a transcendent existence elevated above these worldly processes, with the self as pure Han located conveniently at its center. A dual empowerment is thereby enacted in participants’ imaginations, granting them mastery over the challenges of the world through the notion of tradition, while at the same time engaging in flattering representations of the self as a member of the purest and most civilized of nationalities, the Han. There is nothing subaltern in the real Han, only unrealized yet still essential power.

The source of this collective movement structured around the idea of collective identity is then none other than personal desires, derived from disappointing personal experiences, to create

an ideal self-image of oneself buttressed through five millennia of tradition and civilization. Like the symbols analyzed by Obeyesekere, these responses to personal experiences, first rendered to the broader public as a series of online sketches in the case of the Han Clothing Movement, in turn have collective resonance by appealing to individual desires. The Han chauvinism that is all too easy to find within Han Clothing Movement discourses is primarily a process of falsely confident narcissism in response to the all too real devaluation, uncertainty, and chaos that characterizes participants' daily lives. The ideals of revitalizing tradition, revitalizing the Han, and by extension revitalizing China as a whole are thereby primarily expressions of the desire to re-create the self- a self whose idealized essence has been far too elusive for far too long- under the guise of revitalization or return. The primary value of fantastic Han-ness, then, is its production of an otherwise unattainable fantastic self, as I describe in more detail in the next chapter. However, before we proceed, this conclusion regarding the personal origins of collective identities will be further verified through the curious counter-example of Chen Zhanbing, a movement leader who has undergone what can only be described as radical self-transformation and narcissistic self-inflation through the culturalized medium of Han Clothing.

## **VI. Brother Emperor and the Yellow Emperor©**

Han rituals are the world's most sacred and exalted system of rituals,  
 Han Clothing is the world's most sacred and exalted set of clothing,  
 Han language is the world most sacred and exalted language system,  
 Han architecture is the world's most sacred and exalted architecture.

-From "The Imperial Han" (皇漢), by Chen Zhanbing

Everyone in the Han Clothing Movement detests Chen Zhanbing. The feeling is, based upon my observations, virtually unanimous. Chen is a diminutive and slightly unkempt middle-

aged man who goes by the self-aggrandizing pseudonym “Brother Emperor” (皇帝哥哥), and leads a wing of the Han Clothing Movement known as the Han Society (漢社), also known as the China Han Corporation (中國漢族集團). I initially learned of Chen during my first discussion with a Han Clothing enthusiast in Guangzhou. She had commented that there are “all kinds of people” involved in Han Clothing nowadays, citing Chen Zhanbing as one example. Completely dismissing Chen and asserting that his group’s Han Clothing was made of low-grade polyester, she told me that if he and his Han Society ever tried to set up shop in Guangzhou, she would call the police immediately. I was uncertain at the time as to how her animosity towards Chen’s association had reached these levels, but later found that such animosity was commonplace amongst most Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts who were not associated with Chen’s group. Chen was repeatedly referred to as “anti-Party and anti-socialist” (反黨反社會主義), accused of running a cult, and mocked as a pervert for hosting Han Clothing underwear exhibitions with young female models.

The negative sentiments directed towards Chen, however, only made me ever more interested in meeting him and hearing his side of the story. As such, I decided to contact the Han Society to see if they would be willing to meet with me during an upcoming trip to Northern China. Unbeknownst to me, this letter would soon be read by many of the country’s Han Clothing enthusiasts. I was awakened by a text message one early morning in a Hong Kong hotel, where I was taking a few days’ rest from research. The message was from a Han Clothing activist in Guangzhou, written in English as follows: “Kevin, sorry to trouble you- could you please check your email as soon as possible? There are something [*sic*] very important I must tell you now.” Having left my computer in Guangzhou, I soon learned over the phone that the Han



Society had taken the liberty of posting my email on forums across the Han Clothing internet sphere, celebrating me as a “foreign expert” who recognized the essential and leading role of the Han Society in the Han Clothing Movement as a whole. My friend in Guangzhou told me that the post was being hotly debated, and that she had been contacted by concerned movement participants because she was also affiliated with Sun Yat-sen University: my university affiliation in China, which was so prominently displayed in the Han Society’s postings. The primary result of these posts, which also featured my full email address, was a deluge of emails telling me that the Han Society is composed of “liars” and is nothing more than a “cult.” I soon discovered that alongside the widespread anti-Han Society sentiment amongst movement participants, there is a corresponding mountain of websites and documentation criticizing the Han Society and exposing its “lies,” alongside an equally forceful and confident barrage of Han Society propaganda sent from my unexpected new friends. Considering that this was the most enthusiastic popular response that I received throughout the course of my research, my curiosity about the emotion surrounding the Han Society only grew: despite the fact that one acquaintance in Suzhou ominously warned me that “curiosity killed the cat.”

Thus, against the advice of everyone with whom I had become acquainted and built trust in the preceding months, I visited the “headquarters” of the Han Society in April of 2011. Although Chen told me that the headquarters were located “at the foot of Beijing’s Fragrant Mountain,” a more precise description would locate the headquarters at the north end of Fragrant Mountain Parking Lot #4. The main fragrance, then, was the exhaust from tourist buses and municipal buses, while the Society’s self-described “global headquarters” occupied a total space of roughly 60 square meters littered with Han Clothing, mannequins, and *guqin*. Slogans stretched across the top of the headquarters’ walls read “revitalizing the Han is the responsibility

of each and every Han” and “Westernization is shameful, while Han revitalization if glorious.” Below these slogans, thousands of images of people dressed in Han Clothing adorned all four walls of the space in an imposing collage. Although Chen told me that all of these photographs had been taken at Han Society events, I soon recognized quite a few photographs of acquaintances in other cities who would have been quite unhappy to learn that their visages were being used to promote the Han Society at its headquarters.

In a 2010 book of Chen Zhanbing’s entitled “Entering an Era of Revitalization,” his bio-sketch describes him as “the mightiest great thinker, author, strategist, and most important representative figure of the era of revitalization, and creator of the heavenly kingdom.” And in person, Chen was just as self-celebratory as this description would suggest. Before we had even sat down to begin our discussion, Chen eagerly asserted that he had been promoting Han Clothing since the early 1990s: a full decade before anyone else. According to Chen, on February 2nd of 1991, or the 7900th year of the Xia calendar used by the Han Society, he went to Cuihua Mountain, which is supposedly the home of the mythical figure Nüwa, creator of the world. Just as this location is imagined to have played a central role in the founding of the world and the growth of humanity and civilization, Chen emphasized that it was about to become a sacred location in the revitalization of Han civilization, Chinese civilization, and thus world civilization. The mountain, according to Chen, was covered in blooming flowers when he arrived dressed in full Han regalia. He proceeded to climb to the highest peak of the mountain and worshipped Nüwa. This moment of worship, Chen asserted, marked the establishment of his mystical “heavenly dynasty” (天朝), which was also announced in his 1991 declaration “Manifesto for an Eastern Renaissance” (東方復興宣言). This founding relationship with Nüwa

is one explanation for the Han Society's use of a Xia Calendar rendering 2013 as 7921, rather than the Yellow Emperor based calendar used by most other branches of the movement. Another possible explanation, of course, might be the not so subtle advantage of reaching further back into history than any other calendar in the movement, again reflecting Chen's desire to be the first and the best in all matters. The narcissism of his imaginary relationship with Nüwa is thereby further demonstrated in this calendar, which all too appropriately includes a number of official holidays recognizing important moments in the life of Chen Zhanbing.

Chen's self-declared leading role in the Han Clothing Movement should come as no surprise to anyone who is aware of his self-declared genealogy. Because, according to Chen, he is a direct descendant of both Nüwa and the Yellow Emperor. His 2010 book includes a detailed family tree tracing his descent through 309 generations from the former and 180 generations from the latter (Chen 2010). Such a fantastic lineage is clearly designed as a sign of greatness, which was also demonstrated in the description of Chen's birth featured in the same volume. It reads as follows:

There were many miraculous occurrences surrounding Chen Zhanbing's birth. His mother was bathing in a holy woman's pond in the Nanshan area. This pond connected directly to the sea. Chen's mother rode a dragon to a holy palace at the bottom of the sea where she ate holy balls and began to feel pregnant. In her dreams she saw a phoenix carrying jade as well as a Kirin carrying a holy book. Throughout her pregnancy, she felt as if she was surrounded at all times by dragons and phoenixes (Chen 2010:169).

Chen Zhanbing is thus celebrated first as a direct descendant of the mythical figures of Nüwa and the Yellow Emperor, endowing his lineage with unparalleled mystical power. Then, in this description of his sacred conception without procreation, Chen is characterized in a manner similar to the radically autonomous and self-producing figure of Nezha in *Fengshen Yanyi* (Sangren 2000). The two sides of this overly flattering self-portrayal come together to produce

what Chen described to me as a “heavy burden,” referring to his self-declared personal responsibility to revitalize Han traditional culture, thereby combining all too clearly the intertwinement of the previously cited cultural-nationalist superego and id.

Both bearing and enjoying this self-aggrandizing burden, in which he is heroically tasked from above with the mission of singlehandedly saving Chinese culture, Chen claims that he founded his Han Society in 1993, and that he has since been at the forefront of Movement activities. His main pieces of evidence supporting these assertions are two photographs from 1993, one of which is reproduced below, showing Chen in traditional-style clothing.



**Figure 12- Chen Zhanbing promoting “Han Clothing” a decade before anyone else (Chen 2010)**

However, continuing a pattern of hyperbole and outright delusion already apparent in his genealogy and his description of his birth, these images appear upon closer inspection to be completely unrelated to promoting “Han Clothing.” Rather, the images seem to be the type of photographs frequently taken at popular tourist sites around China, wherein one can briefly rent “traditional style” clothing and have one’s photograph taken for a small fee. These photographs are then primarily evidence that Chen had such photographs taken in the 1990s. However, now that the Han Clothing Movement has emerged, Chen would instead like to portray these photographs as evidence that he is the leading pioneer of the movement, having begun wearing Han Clothing a full decade before anyone else. In making these claims, Chen conveniently overlooks the fact the clothing and hat featured in this image are in fact completely inconsistent with the attire promoted by the current Han Clothing Movement, a fact which has lead to widespread mockery of his claims. Despite these sartorial inconsistencies, however, an even more important fact is that the spirit of hyperbole present in these self-representations is simply all too consistent with the movement as a whole, as I shall argue below: Chen’s lack of restraint or even the slightest hint of subtlety in this regard, taking implicit processes within movement self-presentation and making them all too explicit, is precisely the source of the widespread animosity and mockery towards him and his followers from the broader movement.

From these imagined early beginnings, Chen constructs a similarly astounding history for the Han Society from the 1990s to the present. The group’s first office was supposedly in Shanghai’s landmark Jinmao Tower, one of the most expensive office sites in the city and a highly unlikely location for an organization with no clear source of income. In 2008, Chen claims that he moved out of Jinmao Tower and established his headquarters in the current remote setting on the outskirts of Beijing: his reasoning, he told me, was that Beijing is the political

center of China, and that any movement to revitalize Chinese culture must therefore begin from Beijing. Claiming that his store is at the “center of the world,” Chen asserted that many senior Chinese leaders come to the Fragrant Mountain area outside of Beijing to “rest,” and that he had thus been able to introduce them to Han Clothing and the important work of the Han Society. Unsurprisingly, Chen claimed that these old cadres were greatly impressed with his work, and that, as a result, he has had the opportunity to make presentations at the Forbidden City, the Bird’s Nest Stadium, Tsinghua University, and even the Great Hall of the People. The veracity of any of these reported presentations is highly doubtful. Nevertheless, having imaginarily conquered Beijing, Chen stated that he now aims to establish a Han Clothing store in every major city in China; then establish a store in every province; and eventually, he told me, establish a store in all two thousand-plus counties in China, plus stores in the United States. He told me that he will not rest until every Han compatriot has his or her own set of Han Clothing, made by of course his very own Han Society, the self-declared leaders of the Han Clothing Movement.

Towards these world-dominating goals, Chen has selected a brand spokesman with whom all Han can identify: the Yellow Emperor. Chen Zhanbing not only uses the supposedly sacred image of the Yellow Emperor as the official logo of the Han Society, but also claims to have taken the unprecedentedly quirky step of copyrighting this image. Han Society clothing tags feature this portrait of the Yellow Emperor below the name “Han Society,” with a caption reading, “the creator of Han national clothing: the founding father of the Chinese people, the Yellow Emperor.” Never one to shy away from the spotlight, a second tag on Han Society clothing features an image of Chen Zhanbing in front of the mountain where he worshipped Nüwa, along with the label “Han Society.” Showing me these tags, Chen proudly declared that he had full ownership over the image of the Yellow Emperor. Based upon my discussions with



**Figure 13- Chen Zhanbing and the Yellow Emperor ®**

other Han Clothing activists, Chen’s bravado in declaring such ownership and in juxtaposing himself with this mythical progenitor sends shivers down their spines. Yet for “Brother Emperor,” the self-declared descendant of Nüwa and the Yellow Emperor, such images are just one among many in a lengthy chain of clumsy self-aggrandizing representations through a mythical and mystical tradition.

Chen’s self-exaltation has produced a self-reaffirming psychic system, insofar as many Han Society critics’ attacks, in his eyes, only serve to further reaffirm his declared leading role in the movement. Responding to my questions about the widespread dislike of the Han Society within Han Clothing circles, Chen told me that he does not spend a single second of the day

thinking about them, and comments that “when you are on top, there are always people who want to bring you down.” Locating critiques of Han Society within a broader and predictably self-inflating historical narrative, Chen recounted the past century of Chinese history as a history of precisely such clashes: from 1911, he told me, conservatives clashed with reformists, Communists clashed with the Nationalists, everyone clashed with everyone else in the Cultural Revolution, and now, in the reform era, anyone will do anything that they can to elevate themselves. Because, he claimed, he was the first person to promote Han Clothing (a doubtful assertion), all types of people want to clash with him to make a name for themselves. And because, he claimed, the Han Society is the only Han Clothing organization to have hosted events in every province of China (another highly doubtful assertion), all sorts of smaller local organizations want to clash with the Han Society just to promote themselves. The criticisms of the Han Society, he alleges, are thus primarily products of jealousy which primarily reflect the current disastrous state of morals and personal character in China. The only product of such “disgusting” tactics, he asserted, would be division. His goal, by contrast, is to unite: although of course only under his leadership.

As our conversation drew to a close, Chen Zhanbing did not hesitate to apply his hyperbolic skills to praising me and my work. Describing me variably as a modern-day Marco Polo or Edgar Snow, Chen repeatedly emphasized the importance of my work for promoting a true understanding of Chinese culture. As I left, Chen told me that I needed to share the results of my research with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. When I responded that my dissertation would not likely take priority on Secretary Clinton’s reading list, Chen simply responded that I was underestimating myself. Then, eager to avoid underestimating either one of us, Chen asked



me to copy a section from one of his poems into the guest book and sign my name, while he took a series of photographs. The poem, entitled “Go, China” (中國加油), read as follows:

We need to wash away that century of humiliation and disasters,  
 We must know that for 8000 years we were always the highest, the greatest, the strongest,  
 We were originally the center of the world and its master,  
 When we are united in solidarity we will always be the greatest central power in the world.

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**Figure 14- A photograph of the author (center), Chen Zhanbing (center left), and other members of the Beijing Han Society, outside of their Beijing headquarters, April 2011**

That evening, as expected, images of a certain “renowned American anthropologist visiting the Han Society headquarters” were posted promptly throughout Han Clothing forums. And as expected, these images resulted in another series of emails from movement enthusiasts eager to reveal the dirty truth about the Han Society, and asking whether the photos of me at Han Society headquarters were fake images produced through Photoshop. By this point, however, I was not surprised at the response, and had begun to understand precisely why Chen Zhanbing and the Han Society were so widely detested by other branches of the Han Clothing Movement. Granted, Chen Zhanbing was quite an odd individual who gave himself ridiculous names, held quite a few controversial and essentialist viewpoints, and was always eager to paint a very flattering portrayal of himself. These were the characteristics of Chen’s persona upon which his critics focused. Yet these characteristics in and of themselves were not in fact the primary sources of the animosity towards Chen: as we can see from the aforementioned analysis of personal dilemmas and redeeming self-representation through the Han Clothing Movement, they were not even characteristics unique to Chen. Chen Zhanbing and the Han Society, in fact, are not in my analysis qualitatively different from any other branch of the Han Clothing Movement. Rather, the perceived differences are primarily a matter of quantity. The primary source of animosity toward Chen Zhanbing is then the degree to which Chen’s completely unsubtle self-presentation as self-declared master of the universe made explicit processes of desire and glorification that are otherwise implicit within the Han Clothing Movement, veiled comfortably under the self-legitimizing ideals of ethnicity, tradition, culture, and Chineseness.

In his daily life, Chen faces many of the same dilemmas as the movement participants described in the previous sections: the search for meaning, order, peace, control, dignity, and glory. His attempts to express and thus resolve these issues through the type of self re-creation

provided by the Han Clothing Movement, however, have been uniquely fantastic, shattering the cover of tradition and culture that usually legitimizes the movement's cultural products. Chen's self-naming as Brother Emperor, which sounds just as strange in Chinese as in English, makes explicit the self-aggrandizing nature of movement participants' pseudo-classical pseudonyms. Chen's meticulously detailed yet thoroughly ridiculous genealogy, extending from Nüwa through the Yellow Emperor to Chen himself, as well as his offbeat description of his conception and birth, make explicit the search for worth implicit within the Han Clothing Movement portrayals of Han, the ancestors, and the self. Chen's declared mission to revitalize Han culture makes explicit the search for meaning implicit within the Han Clothing Movement's goals of "revitalizing the Han." And Chen's repeatedly displayed determination to be the first and the best in everything makes explicit the otherwise unspoken yet central component of self-interest and flattery within the Han Clothing Movement.

Within the mainstream practices of the Movement, these aspects of participation are concealed through such legitimizing collective ideas as "Han-ness," "Chineseness," "tradition," "culture," or "essence," providing a naturalizing and immunizing cover for the fantastic self-glorification that has developed within the movement in response to banal realities. By contrast, Chen Zhanbing's complete lack of subtlety and his clumsy overbearing in matters of self-presentation make the interested, self-glorifying operations of the Han Clothing Movement all too apparent. The reason that Han Clothing Movement participants strongly dislike Chen Zhanbing, then, is that when they look at him, they see their desires, their solutions, and most importantly themselves, laid bare below a thoroughly discomfiting magnifying glass.

## Chapter 5

### Reenacting the Land of Rites and Etiquette

Having established the simultaneous dilemma and appeal of the nation as an always unrealized imaginary community, and having traced the location of the Han Clothing Movement and its individual members within these tensions, we now turn to a consideration of the concrete objects and practices through which participants attempt to resolve these tensions. For the Han Clothing Movement is not only a symptom of the dilemmas facing national being; at the same time, it is an imaginary cure, suturing<sup>20</sup> fundamental lacks in the experience of nationhood. This chapter examines three ways in which the always elusive symbolic chain of “the nation” and the idealized image of the national self are fleetingly materialized and incorporated into reality: traditional clothing, ritual, and photography. Incorporating the most “ancient” of practices (ritual) with the most “modern” of technologies (digital photography), and extending a sacred image of the nation progressively across space and time, these three movement methods enact the eagerly sought splendor of the “era of Han and Tang” under the legitimizing guise of tradition and a return to lost roots. The combination of these three practices materializes and stabilizes the otherwise elusive grandeur of the Han, of China, and by extension the grandeur of the self as a seemingly eternal reality, comfortingly misrepresenting a perpetually discordant process as a stable and eternal identity.

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<sup>20</sup> See note 15.

## I. Eternal Apparel

In any examination of the objects and practices of the Han Clothing Movement, clothing must obviously be placed on center stage. Although there are many other aspects to the movement, participants come together first and foremost for clothing, which is imagined to carry the very essence of Han-ness. Expressing this significance, a sign above the entrance to one of the main Han Clothing stores in Guangzhou elevated the importance of Han Clothing to the level of language and characters, reading “Han Clothing, like the Han language (漢語- Chinese language) and Han characters (漢字- Chinese characters), is an integral part of every Han’s life.” Donning Han Clothing is generally a prerequisite for participation in weekend gatherings, and discussions at these gatherings unsurprisingly revolve around the question of clothing, expressing fascination at even the most intricate details of Han Clothing symbolism and design. And just as I was leaving the field in the summer of 2011, one movement group was involved in a power struggle on the inclusion or exclusion of one particular style of clothing (襦裙) as Han Clothing, eventually resulting in the overthrow and expulsion of the group’s leader. These trends highlight the surprising gravity with which matters of clothing are handled within this movement and participants’ deep investment in and fascination by Han Clothing. Yet this fascination then raises the question: why has this neo-traditionalist movement of ethno-nationalist imaginings coalesced around the medium of clothing?



**Figure 15- The author (center right) with Han Clothing enthusiasts in Zhengzhou, April 2011**

### **A. Wrapped in Symbolism**

One of the most impressive aspects of Han Clothing is its perceived symbolic depth and grandeur. Moving far beyond a purely utilitarian understanding of apparel as covering or protection (cf. Flugel 1930), nearly every aspect of Han Clothing is imagined to represent a central component of Chinese culture. My notes from conversations with activists include countless often unpredictable details on the symbolism surrounding this apparel: the circularity of the sleeves refers to the compass, one of the great inventions of Chinese culture; the seam running down the back extends straight, all of the way from top to bottom, symbolizing the importance of moral rectitude; the bottom of the robe ends parallel to the ground below, symbolizing mutuality and balance; the lack of buttons or such modern accouterments as zippers

helps to ensure the natural flow of one's *qi*; the fact that the left side of the robe folds over the right side symbolizes the supremacy of *yang* over *yin*, or in a somewhat more esoteric interpretation, of the mythical green dragon's victory over the white tiger; and the symmetry of the clothing's design as a whole signals the unity, stability, and harmony of society. To an outside observer, many of these symbolic associations appear immediately ridiculous: for example, if Han Clothing was first produced five millennia ago, long before the invention of the compass, then the roundness of its sleeves would not be symbolizing but rather predicting this discovery; yet to engage in a critical examination of such historical inconsistencies would not only be to overlook the distinct possibility that Han Clothing's sleeves are round simply because sleeves tend to be round, but also far more importantly to overlook the allure of these "facts" for movement participants. Such doubts strip away meaning and are thus meaningless to Han Clothing enthusiasts, who find the type of deep significance often lacking elsewhere in life conveniently located within their attire. An informant once noted, revealingly, that the term for one type of male Han Clothing, namely *shenyi* (深衣), was homophonic with the term for deep meaning, *shenyi* (深意): if clothing is "non-verbal communication" (Fleurbaey 2005:20), then Han Clothing transforms the self into a living story.

This symbolic density is attributed to Han Clothing's mythical origins at the beginning of civilization and its rich history over the millennia. Imagined as the first form of clothing in the world, Han Clothing was purportedly invented by the Yellow Emperor, in his full culture-bearing capacities (Billeter 2007), roughly five millennia ago (Feng 2008). This first act of civilization, mythically concurrent with the establishment of houses, provided protection to subjects as well as order to society, establishing the emperor's rule of "all under heaven." This

clothing was then, according to movement mythologies, passed down through the generations and worn throughout the dynasties and their accompanying grand historical moments until the Qing. To believe that “Han Clothing” was created by and passed down from the “Yellow Emperor” would be equivalent to believing that something called “Western clothing” could be derived from Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, such rational observations are again of far less import than the affective identifications produced in these mythologies: clothing therein is the mark of civilization, as well as a material manifestation of the imaginary identifications established in always grandiose national histories, collecting and transmitting the symbols of what we now call “Chinese culture” from the distant past to the present.

What happens, then, when one dons this rich symbolic coterie? As the source of civilization itself, found at the origins of culture and carrying the symbols of the grand culture that followed, Han Clothing bears a striking resemblance to the sacred as analyzed by Maurice Godelier. In *The Enigma of the Gift*, Godelier characterizes the sacred as “a certain type of relationship that humans entertain with the origin of things” (Godelier 1999:171), wherein the human origins of society are alienated to supernatural beings and in turn embodied in sacred worldly objects which are presumed to represent these supernatural powers. Han Clothing, as a symbol of culture descended from the mythical progenitor the Yellow Emperor, bears the marks of the sacred. In this light, Godelier’s subsequent analysis of the ways in which the possession of these sacred objects, such as the kwaimatnie, bull-roarers, and flutes of the Baruya, give humans symbolic power and sets them apart from others in society as representatives of the divine, illusorily naturalizing their superiority, is relevant for considering the effects of self-representation through Han Clothing, wherein those who don these garments perceive themselves as symbolically tied to the divine nature of Han-ness and tradition.



Yet in comparison with Godelier's examples, Han Clothing is a sacred object that one can not only hold but within which one literally wraps oneself as a symbolic representative of the often cited "five millennia of civilization." Thus, together with the apparently homogenizing aspects of Han Clothing as uniform there coexists an imaginarily empowering side of cultural symbolism borne by the self. Studies of the phenomenon of uniforms in modern society have noted the disciplining role that such apparel has played in enacting and internalizing group identifications (Craik 2003:144; McVeigh 2000). Although Han Clothing indeed contains such disciplinary and identity-bound elements seeking a romanticized homogeneity (cf. Befu 2001), it nevertheless presents a unique case as a totalizing uniform that is neither imposed nor enforced but rather actively sought. Rather than a tool for the internalization of particular group identifications imposed from the outside, then, Han Clothing would be better understood as the willing appropriation of said identifications, always greater than the self, making the wearer the singular "embodiment of a joint spirit" (Simmel, et al. 1997:194).

Han Clothing as a symbolically rich representative of Chinese culture derived from its origins is then, alongside the usual shirts, slacks, jeans, and skirts donned by the average urban Han, an alternative form of symbolic capital in the present. Although Han Clothing enthusiasts, contradicting the fundamentalist narrative of all human history as class struggle imposed after 1949, envision the past as a time of internal homogeneity, represented in the form of a single, homogenizing ethnic uniform, they nevertheless as representatives of this imaginary unity in the present elevate themselves above their fellow Han as their sole true national representatives. One interviewee recounted how when she wears Han Clothing she simply "feels different," allowing her to carry herself differently and behave differently. The ability of an object to change the way one feels and one's sense of oneself represents the imaginary power of said object: examples in

more familiar contexts might include luxury brand items, Apple merchandise, or organic and other eco-friendly merchandise which present a particular elevated image of their owner to viewers. Yet alongside this imaginary power, the existence of this object as simply an object means that one can own and thus control it, along with its attendant aura. The object emanates an imaginary power that extends far beyond it, yet at the material level this imaginary power is able to be held and thus fully possessed by its owner, who in turn objectifies him or herself through this object.

## **B. Materializing Grandeur**

The symbolic density of Han Clothing is buttressed by a second aspect of clothing, its stability, a simultaneous product of Han Clothing's historical narratives and its fundamental materiality: it has been passed down supposedly unchanged from the distant past, and it is immediately here, in the present, to be used. The previous chapters examined the perpetually fleeting nature of national ideals, proposing that nation-states construct symbolic chains of grandeur that are never fully realized or manifested in experience. With the combined grandeur and materiality of Han Clothing, a particular romanticized image of nationality and of oneself within said nationality is made immediately present as a "thing." Han Clothing enthusiasts can have and hold this grandeur; one can rent it or one can buy it; one can wear it or one can tuck it away in one's closet for special days; one can distinguish oneself from those immediately surrounding oneself or one can post photos of oneself in Han Clothing online for others to see: Han Clothing as a materialization of a particular ideal of "Chineseness" is there, and one can in reality do with it as one pleases.

The stable materiality which supports the symbolic depth of Han Clothing is, in turn, particularly symbolically resonant in an era of unpredictable and destabilizing change. Anne Hollander has noted the ways in which non-fashion or “traditional clothing” is linked to a fixed cosmology, representing an ideal of certainty to both its wearers and its beholders (Hollander 1994:18). Although Hollander does not refer to China in her discussion, such a fixed cosmology and sense of stable order has long been intertwined with the conceptualization of clothing and attendant clothing regulation in the Middle Kingdom. The myth of the Yellow Emperor and his invention of clothing cited above asserts that the clothing system “helped to visually differentiate the respected from the lowly, classifying people according to their status, so as to assure that no great disorder would arise under heaven” (Feng 2008:16). The Qin Dynasty attempted to produce an immensely hierarchical and obsessively ordered society through detailed regulations on everything from the largest to the most minor aspects of the polity, including clothing (Dean and Massumi 1992:22). Upon establishing the Ming Dynasty in the fourteenth century, Zhu Yuanzhang again made efforts to order society under the new regime through a regulatory system on clothing (Yuan 2007). And the power of the Qing Dynasty was manifested and maintained in its enforcement of particular hairstyles (Hiltebeitel and Miller 1998) as well as, within the mythology of the Han Clothing Movement, particular styles of clothing. Clearly, movement participants’ investment in clothing as a potential source of order is not historically unprecedented.

Two layers of meaning can be read from this brief history of clothing in Chinese culture. First, clothing is imaginarily intertwined with the stability of the polity: order in clothing is presumed to mean order in society. Second, there is continuous stability in clothing within the polity: in a fantasy of historical homogeneity, movement narratives emphasize the continuity of

apparel from the era of the Yellow Emperor until the rise of the Qing Dynasty, meaning that each of these “Han” enactments of heavenly order was realized through and embodied in Han Clothing. Insofar as such order is perceived as lacking in the present, it is also perceived as a solution to this lack which can be recaptured, or an ideal vision of how things once were and how they might one day be again. As such, what Anne Hollander (1994) variably calls “the trap of tradition” or “the prison of unquestioning wisdom” can also be experienced as an imaginary sanctuary or safe haven of certainty, order, and thus comfort in an era of uncertainty. Han Clothing is thus an anti-fashion, capable of overturning the disorderly rhythm of shifting styles and desires, which are homologous to the unpredictable shifts of contemporary society described in the previous chapter, to promote a lasting order embodied in the eternal figure of Han Clothing and the self covered therein. As one popular Han Clothing motto claims, “Chinese clothing on one’s body brings a lifetime of peace (華服在身，平安一生).”

This ordering and stabilizing function extends not only to society but also, again, to the self. It is worth noting that according to movement mythology, the only material remnants left behind by the Yellow Emperor at the time of his death were, in fact, his clothing. When the Yellow Emperor was 110 years old, myths recount that the Jade Emperor dispatched a dragon to earth to take him away to the heavens. The Yellow Emperor’s subjects, who had come to love this first grand sovereign and all that he had given them, were distraught at the thought of his departure, and tried to grab onto his robes in an attempt to prevent him from leaving. Although the Emperor did not remain with his subjects, some pieces of his apparel came off and remained as his sole material presence on Earth. According to this myth and its appropriation by movement enthusiasts, none other than Han Clothing has remained resting, like bones, in the

mausoleum of the progenitor, and is believed to still be present in his tomb. Such imagined permanence and stability is lacking in almost every aspect of actual human existence: from the unattainability of the grandeur of national narratives in everyday experience to the fundamental insecurity of the mortal and thus impermanent self, Han Clothing provides an opportunity for participants to literally surround themselves in attire which is thought to be descended from the beginning of Chinese culture, which captures the essence of this culture in an immediately present form capable of being possessed, and which although greater than oneself nevertheless becomes part of oneself and can last far beyond oneself as undying matter (Renne 1995). The elusiveness and ambiguity of Han-ness and by extension Chineseness is transformed into a stable, coherent, and possessable unit, with a grand continuity established from the past into the present of which one is part, and similarly extending from the present into the future: a symbolically rich envelope (Lemoine-Luccioni 1983) in which one can wrap and present oneself.

### **C. Naturalizing the “Great Han”**

This intersection of the symbolically grand and the materially stable, or the aesthetic and the secure, is further supported by a third characteristic of clothing, namely its taken-for-granted nature, noted in the first half of the quotation cited at the beginning of this discussion: “clothing is a quite ordinary item, but it also contains deep cultural characteristics” (Feng 2008:19). As discussed above, clothing is a symbolic medium, carrying cultural images as well as deeper messages of stability and certainty; yet its symbolic nature exists alongside its ordinary nature, meaning that messages expressed through clothing are often naturalized as expressions of the intrinsic nature of the wearer. It is something of a truism to state that people who dress in a

particular manner are generally perceived in that manner: as such, the construction of an image of the self proceeds alongside a construction of this image as quite natural and unconstructed. For example, when one attends a job interview either in the United States or in China, one generally wears a suit and tie to present a seemingly more refined image of the self. Although all involved know that the interviewee does not wear a suit and tie all day every day, the donning of this outfit is seen as a natural reflection of the minimal internal qualities necessary for one's recognition in such a setting. In other less formal situations where a suit and tie are unnecessary, the same outfit can by contrast present an image of unseemly uptightness: this counter-example importantly reminds us that even when the message conveyed by clothing is pejorative and thus unintended by the wearer, it is still often perceived by the viewer as a direct expression of the wearer's internal self.

The sign above the entrance to a popular Han Clothing store in Guangzhou mentioned at the start of this chapter states that “Han Clothing is, just like the Han language (Chinese language) and Han characters (Chinese characters), a central component of any Han's life.” This is not only a statement of the value of Han Clothing, but also the articulation of an important metaphorical relationship between these three aspects of “Han-ness” (漢語 *hanyu*, 漢字 *hanzi*, 漢服 *hanfu*). All are pre-formed structures or tools that come from outside of oneself, like the idea of the Han itself, yet become an intrinsic part of selfhood, and even the primary tools of the presentation and indeed the realization of the self. This external characteristic then comes to be interpreted as an inherent expression of oneself, as one who speaks Han language, reads Han characters, and now wears Han Clothing, and is thus fully and purely Han. This symbolically self-integrating characteristic of clothing then ensures that while the Han Clothing Movement

promotes a thoroughly constructed and idealized image of the “Han nationality” existing in grand and undifferentiated harmony from time immemorial, the use of clothing to express this idea presents this constructed reality as a natural, intrinsic property of those who present themselves under the banner of “the Great Han.” Tellingly, although Han Clothing is worn on the exterior of the body, the message that it presents was frequently described by informants as “beauty from within coming outwards (由内往外的美).”

#### **D. Complicating the “Great Han”**

However, as mentioned above, the message communicated is at times not the message intended, yet is similarly interpreted as intrinsic to the wearer. Ironically, considering the ethno-nationalist origins of the Han Clothing Movement, movement enthusiasts walking the streets of China today are often misrecognized as “Japanese” or “Koreans.” The foreignness of Han Clothing leads spectators to assume that its wearers are members of the quite diverse collection of non-Chinese within China singularly referred to as “foreigners” (*waiguoren*). Han Clothing, in fact, stood out so prominently on the streets that bystanders, rarely hesitant to grant me a stare or shout “hello,” barely took notice of me when I walked the streets of China’s cities with Han Clothing devotees. Instead, passersby would often laughingly shout “*konnichiwa*” or “*an-nyeong-ha-se-yo*” at the Han Clothing enthusiasts with me, based in the association of “traditional clothing” with such Asian neighbors as Japan and Korea. This perceived misrecognition, although annoying to clothing enthusiasts, is generally restyled as a tool for further self-flattery, as enthusiasts congratulate themselves on their deep grasp of Han tradition

in contrast to their less informed compatriots: again, recognizing themselves as the sole true representatives of Han-ness.

Yet at other times, this misrecognition can be significantly more problematic. When the captain of a Chinese fishing boat was detained by the Japanese Coast Guard in September 2010 in the contested Senkaku Islands region, the now all too familiar scene of “anti-Japanese protests” (反日遊行) again appeared in cities across China. One such city was Chengdu, which is also home to a large and fairly active contingent of Han Clothing enthusiasts. In an unfortunate collision of nationalisms, one young enthusiast wore Han Clothing one evening in October to dine at Diko’s, a local imitation of Kentucky Fried Chicken that markets itself as “Chinese fried chicken.” She unknowingly caught the attention of a crowd of anti-Japanese protestors who, failing to recognize Han Clothing as in any way “Han,” presumed that this young lady was wearing a kimono and was thus Japanese, thereby transforming her in the odd logic of angry nationalism into a representative of Japan upon whom frustration about this incident could be unleashed. Again, a message was clearly portrayed, and presumed to be intrinsic to the wearer, but was certainly not the message intended. Surrounding the windows of the restaurant and chanting patriotic slogans, this Han Clothing enthusiast was left immensely perplexed as to what was happening. When she tried to leave the restaurant, however, she discovered to her surprise as a proud Han that she was in fact the target of the protestors’ wrath. Refusing to listen to her explanation that she was wearing Han Clothing and not a kimono, the crowd forced her to kneel and take off her dress under which she was wearing only underpants. When she fled to the women’s room inside Diko’s, the crowd outside took the opportunity to burn her perceived “kimono” amidst a rush of cell-phone photography and filming. A misinterpretation of the



perceived message of Han Clothing led in this case to an uncomfortable collision between two branches of nationalism.

Another common misinterpretation of Han Clothing comes as a form of “cosplay” (コスプレ), the popular cultural originating in Japan, in which usually young people dress as and take on the characteristics of their favorite characters from manga and anime programs (Narumi 2009). Comments from onlookers about “cosplay” and questions to enthusiasts about what characters they represent are a persistent irritant to Han Clothing devotees on the streets. Yet just as the case above is telling with regard to the clash of nationalisms, this misrecognition is also quite revealing. The usual response from Han Clothing enthusiasts that “this is not cosplay at all, it’s completely different” belies a certain anxiety, reminiscent of the aggressive self-differentiation of most movement enthusiasts from Chen Zhanbing, striving to distinguish Han Clothing from cosplay to defend against the recognition of their fundamental similarities. Enthusiasts suggest that whereas cosplay is simply a fad, Han Clothing is a lasting tradition; whereas cosplayers briefly take on an imaginary role, Han Clothing enthusiasts realize their true identity and tradition. The foregoing analyses, however, suggest the undeniable similarities between the two, namely the taking on of a role greater than oneself as oneself. I was then not surprised to find in my research a certain degree of overlap between Han Clothing circles and cosplay circles in the Pearl River Delta: quite a few Han Clothing enthusiasts also displayed an interest in manga and cosplay, while some cosplay enthusiasts at expos or weekend gatherings would occasionally don Han Clothing. It is this similarity, or the fundamental equation of the two types of activity that produces the defensive reaction that the two activities are “completely

different.” Tellingly, less than fully dedicated participants in the Han Clothing Movement are often disparagingly labeled as “just doing cosplay (他們就是搞 cosplay).”

Han Clothing thus, while suturing fundamental lacks in national experience, continues to produce further identity dilemmas. Yet just as the solution to the problems posed by the inherently disappointing nationalist experience is to be found in further nationalism, so the solution to the problems posed by Han Clothing are to be found in Han Clothing: the promotion of knowledge about this ethnic uniform will, in the eyes of enthusiasts, resolve the problems discussed above. Yet this solution has its limits, for Han Clothing’s combination of sacredness and taken-for-granted-ness produces a far more irresolvable dilemma which has riled the movement from its inception: the tension between the sacred and the profane. The vast majority of movement participants wear their Han Clothing on special occasions, such as traditional festivals, rituals or other ceremonies, or at the least weekend gatherings with other movement participants, generally held in such aesthetically appropriate environments as temples, memorials, or parks. Yet the final goal of Han Clothing activities, as often stated, is to produce a society in which everyone wears Han Clothing. There thus remains a current within the movement that is dedicated to wearing Han Clothing on a daily basis: one on-site computer repairman, for example, was particularly proud of his habit, painstakingly documented by a mountain of photographs, of arriving at people’s apartments to work on their computers in his Han Clothing; other movement participants celebrate their determination to wear their Han Clothing on a daily basis to school or to their office jobs. Such a deployment of Han Clothing seeks to distribute its sacredness throughout one’s life and throughout society towards the goal of making both sacred as a whole; this is, after all, how the past is presumed to have been, a time in which everyone

wore Han Clothing at all times, and in which society was characterized by etiquette, elegance, aesthetics, and social harmony.

This approach, while realizing the proliferation of the sacred and thus approximating fantasy, nevertheless runs the risk of making the sacred profane, or even cheapening the sacred by making it too widespread and thereby obliterating the fantasy around which the movement is structured. Chen Zhanbing, described in the previous chapter, repeatedly vacillated between describing all of his clothing as handmade and thus authentic in a traditional, or as mass-produced and thus popular in a seemingly more profane yet equally sacred mode, yet another tension to which there appears to be no clear solution. James Flugel proposes that clothing provides a medium to realize the “maximum of satisfaction in accordance with the reality principle” (Flugel 1930:183), an assessment which applies with equal validity to Han Clothing and the unrelenting national reality principle which it attempts to overcome. For although one’s image can be purified in Han Clothing, constructing an ideal heritage extending from the distant past into the present, one’s surroundings nevertheless remain unchanged and profoundly profane, as illustrated by the misconceptions above. In the course of my research with Han Clothing enthusiasts, I repeatedly observed the often comical ways in which the present broke through ideal moments: inescapable “surrounding and observing (圍觀)” from curious bystanders, puzzled questions about enthusiasts’ nationality, or obnoxious posing for pictures. Hence participants face a new problem: the greater the distribution of such sacred moments, the greater the risk that they will be spoiled, thereby failing to resolve the tension between the sacred idea and profane experience of China that originally generated this desire, and thus reproducing this desire for the sacred as fantasy and its attendant cultural products.

This tension between the sacred and the profane is thus an expression of a far more fundamental point of concern for the Han Clothing Movement: the problem of the present. Movement narratives joyfully recount the grandeur of the Han people, extending from their mythic origins at the time of the Yellow Emperor until the perceived disgrace of the Qing Dynasty. These narratives do not change the fact that movement participants live in the present; yet in relation to this present, it is important to note that the sign described earlier reading “Han Clothing is, just like the Han language and Han characters, an integral part of every Han’s life” is located directly above the entrance to a Han Clothing store, so that visitors are required to cross this symbolic boundary from the profane mall in which a Kentucky Fried Chicken is located across the hall to be reborn symbolically into this detached space of pure and sacred “Han-ness.” The next section examines this location in the ambiguous present and the means through which attempts are made to distribute sacred and profane spaces in appropriate proportions therein.

## **II. Rediscovering the Land of Rites and Etiquette**

### **A. Coming of Age in Shenzhen**

The present could not have seemed more distant during a girl’s coming of age ceremony (成人禮) one April afternoon in Shenzhen, marking the passage from childhood to adulthood in a traditional matter, during a celebration of the Shangsi Festival (上祀節). Promoted in recent years by Han Clothing enthusiasts, the Shangsi Festival is described as “Women’s Day” in imperial China: at best an anachronism and perhaps more accurately an oxymoron, this



**Figure 16- The conclusion of a coming of age ceremony, Splendid China theme park, Shenzhen, April 2011**

unexpected description belies this festival's status as an invented tradition. Yet such invention was never made apparent that afternoon. The master of ceremonies displayed an unwavering propensity for speaking in Classical Chinese. Although this linguistic idiosyncrasy left the majority of spectators perplexed as to the content of his monologue, it added a mystifying air of seemingly pure tradition descended from time immemorial, a self-segregating mystification that I encountered repeatedly throughout my research. According to this master of ceremonies, when a young lady turned fifteen in traditional China, her parents would hold a coming of age ceremony for her. The pinning ceremony for women (簪禮), which was to be enacted that afternoon, was

described as a “solemn ceremonial process (莊重儀式過程)” passed down from the ancestors.

Yet the accompanying declaration that the ceremony was now “officially starting” (正式開始), a form of official-speak often associated with state meetings and events, belied the ways in which the past and the present are always intertwined in Han Clothing imaginings and practices.

Once the ceremony had begun, the initiates’ parents entered first, and proceeded to take a seat. Then the initiate (簪者), dressed in an elaborate and colorful Han Clothing outfit that marked her as the center of attention, entered, bowed to her elders, and knelt upon a pillow. The host read aloud a passage in largely indecipherable classical Chinese. Upon completion of this passage, the initiate’s hair was combed, and a pin was inserted into her hair. She then went backstage to change into a new outfit, and when she emerged again, she bowed to her parents once more and returned to kneel on her pillow. Another passage was read and another pin was inserted. This process was repeated one more time before the initiate knelt again upon a pillow and bowed deeply three times to the flag of the People’s Republic of China, in a memorable anachronism. Yet despite such quirky moments, an air of solemnity reigned throughout the process. As the ritual proceeded, the master of ceremonies explained the meanings behind each act, returning to the question of symbolism discussed in the previous section. For example, each time that a hairpin is added to the initiate’s hair, her hair is held more tightly to her scalp, representing increasing levels of “social responsibility (社會責任).” According to the MC’s explanation, one can run about with one’s hair in wild disarray as a child; yet adulthood requires a certain degree of control and decorum. Hence, the repeated insertion of hairpins to the hair, bringing this unruly mass under control, presents a symbol of the initiate’s new role and responsibilities within society. Each change of clothing is further described as making the

initiate's attire increasingly "luxurious (華貴)," thus emphasizing, alongside the pins, a proper balance between strength and beauty in the model woman, or what the master of ceremonies called "proper values (正確價值觀)." Such proper values are again highlighted in the repeated acts of bowing to one's parents as well as, eventually, to the flag, both of which represent "knowing where you came from" and proper respect for one's elders.

Despite these inherently complex explanations of each step in the ritual process, resembling the elaborate explanations of the various eternal symbolic elements within Han Clothing, I argue that the precise meaning of symbolic moments therein is never as important as the simple presence of such meaning. Although participants in the Han Clothing Movement viewed this moment as the revitalization of a central ritual of traditional China, essential to both personal development and social order as a whole, what was enacted that afternoon was not so much a traditional ritual as a drama of movement participants' relations to an imagined national past and the lived present through the legitimizing guise of pseudo-tradition. The following analysis then intends, like the preceding analysis of Han Clothing, to question this practice's presentation as an "eternal tradition," and to instead interpret the social and personal motivations and rewards of this particular presentation of Han-ness.

A first prominent characteristic of this ritual is its location outside of contemporary society. Victor Turner, drawing upon Arnold Van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage (Gennep 1960), has highlighted separation or segregation from the outside world as a fundamental feature of the ritual process (Turner 1977:94). This separation is, however, particularly pronounced in Han Clothing Movement rituals, insofar as the ritual process is constructed in direct opposition to contemporary society and in hopes of, as I discuss below, the thorough reconstruction of

society, producing a determinedly abstracting and insulating tendency in ritual practice. These tendencies are most evident in the actual physical location of ritual: although the environment of the average Han Clothing Movement participant is the ever-bustling city, great efforts were made to locate ritual activities in the most serene and removed of spaces, such as mountaintops, riversides, or parks.

Yet beyond physical exteriority, an air of formality and traditionalism within the ritual space symbolically constructed this space as sacred and thus distant from the profane nature of modern society, emerging transcendent over reality. Within a social environment that revolves around *renao* (熱鬧), literally meaning “hot and noisy” but often translated as “lively,” the solemn quiet that inevitably embraced the ritual environment was all the more striking: ritual participants moved slowly and carefully through the steps of the ritual process, while movement participants and the majority of outside viewers watched in an imposing silence. Within a linguistic environment that is thoroughly vernacularized, and in which the most imposing of languages is the formulaic yet grandiose voice of officialdom, the consistent use of Classical Chinese had a mystifying effect: the inability of most listeners to understand what was being said only made this at once natural yet also distant language all the more symbolically powerful (cf. Jing 1996). In a world that can often seem meaningless and underwhelming, everything within the ritual space from the arrangement of actors to the slightest of prescribed actions is presumed to have deep symbolic meaning. And although, as discussed above, Han Clothing often seems completely out of place in most contemporary settings and provokes continual curious and even amused questioning from passersby, within the ritual context with its solemn atmosphere, eloquent classical articulations, and presumably deep meaning, the elaborate designs of Han



Clothing finally seemed completely at home. Movement participants were thus in their element within the segregated ritual space, insofar as they were far removed from the social reality which both structures and denies their fantasies.

This distance from everyday life points to a second characteristic of ritual, namely its imaginary power: for although the ritual space is located outside of and constructed in direct opposition to contemporary society, it is presumed to have an ordering effect upon society. A lengthy mystical-functionalist tradition extending from Confucius to the Qianlong Emperor (cf. Zito 1997) has celebrated a form of “magical thinking” (Freud 1989) which imagines a metaphorical relationship between ritual space and society such that the proper enactment of rituals aids the ordering of the polity. The system of ritual offerings in pre-modern China extended from the grand imperial altars all the way down to the village level, constructed around the assumption that “the logic of these ritual activities would appear to be the very logic organizing the social body and the rhythms of nature” (Bell 1992:129). While the actual existence of any such ritual efficacy is of course highly unlikely, this long-standing school of thought has the advantage of historical distance working in its favor in the present: having read, as any student would, about the efficacy of rites and ritual in classical texts like *The Analects*, an overly romantic and mystified vision of the imperial past as a perfectly ritually ordered society in contrast to the profane and disordered present naturally emerges. Such a contrast could then, of course, be tautologically reaffirmed by the evident lack of traditional ritual in this profane and disordered social present.

Derived from this historical fascination with and exaltation of “*li*,” as well as the mystical retroactive imaginings of a perfectly ordered society that it generates, traditional Chinese culture

and society as a whole are envisioned in the present as having been uniquely saturated with ritual, and thus uniquely endowed with an all-encompassing meaning and order: a meaning and order which has since disintegrated, and must now be revitalized. One informant from Wuhan shared his proposal for recapturing this imagined ritual glory: rather than a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage, he envisioned a ritual space in every park. Fascinated with the perceived ubiquity of ritual in imperial China and the complementary ubiquity of churches in contemporary American communities, he imagined a direct link between ritual-religious activities and national power; after all, he mused, when ritual practice extended throughout Chinese society, China was a land of grandeur and wealth looked upon with envy the world over, a “middle kingdom” proper. Churches in the United States, he continued, play a central role in communities across the country, producing solidarity and strength that extends throughout the polity, making America a land of grandeur and wealth looked upon with envy the world over: again, this informant suggested that America today was “more Chinese than China” (比我們還華), and that China had become considerably more barbarian (夷). In seeking a resolution to this troubling situation, he drew upon a saying that “it is ritual that marks people as people” (人所以為人者，禮儀也); accordingly, at the time of our meetings he was in the midst of drafting a proposal to be submitted to the National People’s Congress recommending that a ritual altar be built in every public park across China. Such an initiative, he reasoned, could provide a communal space in which communities might gather together and develop a stronger feeling of togetherness, as well as a sacred space in which ancient rituals passed down from the ancestors could be enacted, for the ritual enactment of a new political community (cf. Berezin 1997). The combination of greater communal solidarity and ritual efficacy was, in this informants’ mind, central to bringing a new order to society, and making China “Chinese” again. Such a functionalist ritual imaginary,

located within the dynamics of national fantasy and the perceived “non-Chinese” nature of today’s China, is an exemplary case of Edmund Leach’s characterization of ritual as “mak[ing] explicit what is otherwise a fiction” (Leach 1954:16): namely the ideal image of the nation, with the self located securely at its center.

This imagined efficacy is related to ritual’s third characteristic, namely its imaginary production of a sense of control in opposition to the unpredictability and difficulties of the world beyond. From the earliest stages of the anthropological study of the ritual phenomenon, both Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown noted the role of worldly anxiety in the creation of ritual and the resulting relief of anxiety in the ritual process (Homans 1941). Spatially, as noted above, the ritual space is carefully insulated from the world outside, creating an ideally controlled realm detached from the flows of unpredictability that dominate life. Yet this sense of control and predictability is further symbolically supported by the fact that the actions performed within this space are even further removed from any hint of unpredictability: simplicity, repetition, and invariance are the main characteristics of ritual action (Bell 1992:150). These traits are most apparent in the example of the coming-of-age ceremony described above, which revolved solely around the repeated insertion of hairpins into an initiate’s hair: the type of activity that in profane settings is unlikely to draw much of an audience. Despite the simplicity and banality of these actions within a non-ritual setting, they are nevertheless endowed with meanings that are anything but simple and banal within ritual space. Their enactment is tightly prescribed and precisely ordered (Kapferer 1997:178), based in the belief that their completion will have substantive real-world effects through an otherworldly agency that extends far beyond the immediate ritual space. They are enacted slowly and with careful attention to detail (Kapferer 1997:180), as was made painfully apparent that afternoon in Shenzhen, to ensure the proper steps

and the presumed proper effects. These intricately prescribed, repetitious, and simple actions furnish a sense of control and power that might otherwise be lacking in a world in which getting anything at all done is usually far from simple.

As Victor Turner has memorably observed, ritual renders “the structurally inferior as the morally and ritually superior,” transforming “secular weakness” into “sacred power” (Turner 1977:125). Cut off from the external world and its uncertainties and complications, yet imagined to have profound effects upon this external world; at once simple and repetitive, yet also deeply meaningful and powerful, ritual activities endow their enactors with agency far beyond that which they enjoy in their daily lives. The profiles in the previous chapter highlighted the ways in which the burdens and enormity of life continually bore down upon movement participants, often leaving them unable to attain their ideals no matter how they tried; ritual action inverts this situation by endowing even the smallest and simplest of actions with a profound meaning and far-reaching effects. The ritual space then provides a microcosmic realm for the acting out of extreme agency on a personal level in relation to society, an agency that is clearly lacking in Han Clothing enthusiasts’ daily lives.

Contemporary social alienation, a long-standing tradition idealizing ritual’s efficacy, and personal desires for control and power are then essential to the rise of ritual as a core component of Han Clothing Movement activities. Parallels between imaginings of ritual and imaginings of Han Clothing are instructive: both are constructed in opposition to mainstream modes of contemporary existence; both promise an otherwise elusive order through intricate attention to detail and a particularly rich symbolic depth; both are presumed to be capable of changing the course of contemporary China, and both place the self firmly at the center of these symbolically

rich and practically powerful media, exercising control through the material possession of clothing as culture or the imaginarily practical action of ritual as agency. The control provided by each stabilizes otherwise irresolvable aspects of existence, from the fleeting nature of one's sense of identity to the uncertainty of the current social order and of one's position and path therein. Most importantly and fundamentally, however, both imaginarily express direct relationships to the sacred. Han Clothing imagines this direct relationship extending from the mythic origins of humanity towards the present; yet as stated in the previous section, even after recapturing this symbolically sacred materiality in the present, the current social environment continues to pose dilemmas which make the sacred appear remote or even foreign. Ritual responds by producing an insulated yet meaningful space in which the fantasies of Han Clothing can be acted out in the present, finally managing to locate oneself, however fleetingly, within an ideal image of the "land of rites and etiquette."

### **B. My Big Sacred Han Wedding**

Reflecting this search for control and power in a fundamentally uncontrollable world, the primary ritual activities promoted by the Han Clothing Movement revealingly revolve around precisely such important and generally uncertain moments in the individual's life: such rites of passage as the entrance into adulthood, the entry into marriage, and the birth of children. *Chengren* (成人) or the entrance into adulthood, for example, is one of the central focuses of movement ritual activities, as well as arguably one of the more difficult and socially charged passages in one's life experience, or is at least perceived as such at the time, raising questions of self-assertion, independence, sexuality, and relations to one's family and society as a whole. The

profiles in the previous chapter illustrated the centrality of precisely these issues in movement participants' lives: from difficulties in finding a stable career and a reliable source of income, to continued reliance upon and residence with parents, difficulties in finding and keeping a partner, and general challenges in asserting independence as an "adult" proper. Faced with these issues, there is no single solution; nevertheless, movement participants find it quite pleasant to imagine that there may be one. Taming the inherent complexity of this real-world process through the considerably more straightforward and brief ritual process, one begins as a non-adult and emerges soon after as an adult. The imagining of traditional Chinese society as a society saturated with ritual then not only envisions a well organized society, but also individual life courses immersed in a similarly logical order, conveniently marked by solemn and symbolically deep rituals.

Logic, order, and solemnity are by contrast not exactly the first words that come to mind in these transitional moments today. During my time living and working in Shanghai, one of my closest friends went through a marriage process which can arguably be characterized as typical of contemporary urban life. The first step after the always anxiety-inducing proposal was a day-long couple's photo session, in which the couple's costumes appeared to have been infected with some sort of sartorial multiple personality disorder, ranging from a quite conventional white tuxedo and puffy white bridal dress to a gaudy men's outfit resembling generals' clothing from the Napoleonic era accompanied by a puffy and colorful Cinderella-like dress. Then, when the day of the wedding arrived, the proceedings were anything but solemn. With guests seated at circular tables in a hotel conference room, the bride and groom were accompanied onto the stage at the front of the room by a spotlight, blaring music, stage fog, some mild pyrotechnics, and a

gaudily dressed host. The host, dedicated to creating and maintaining a “hot and noisy” (熱鬧) environment, would have been more in his element at a Las Vegas revue: he only took a break from his unrelenting commentary when accompanying the bride and groom around to the various guests’ tables to engage in round upon round of toasts of high-proof liquor. Particular emphasis was placed upon the bride and groom crossing arms and completing a “bottoms up” (乾杯) to represent their intertwinement: the pungent baijiu liquor used for these incessant toasts ensured that the bride, groom, and even the guests could not help but stumble as they departed at the end of the evening.

“That type of a wedding ceremony, that’s a barbarian (胡人) ceremony. We Han don’t decorate ourselves or our wedding chambers so gaudily (花). We don’t have all of that noise. And we never force people into toasts (勉強勸酒). We Han didn’t do these types of things until the barbarians came in the Yuan and the Qing.” Thus spoke one informant, clearly disenchanted with the state of the modern Chinese matrimony: and as a long-standing bachelor, he has good reason to be concerned. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the process of finding a marriage partner in today’s China has become increasingly complex, with factors of money, status, looks, personality, location, property, and countless other considerations bearing down upon young couples. Furthermore, once these initial obstacles have been overcome, the challenge of staying married has similarly grown, with rapid increases in recent years in extramarital affairs and divorces. Although one should be skeptical of any narrative of decline from an idealized past that is home to the immaculate family, these trends nevertheless produce an impression of the disintegration of the family structure, presumably the core of “Chinese culture.” And again based in the imaginary relationship between ritual and social trends, the unruly state of the

contemporary wedding embodies the unruly state of contemporary marriage culture; the disorderly wedding is a metaphor for a disorderly matrimonial culture: and Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts once again claim to have a solution.

An authentic “Han” wedding as promoted in recent years by movement enthusiasts is a far more solemn and serious affair than the standard contemporary wedding, endowed with deep and long-standing meaning from start to finish. Upon entering, the bride and groom proceed to either side of a jade basin, bow to one another, and use the crystal-clear water within the basin to wash their hands and face, purifying themselves for their new married life together. They then proceed to eat from the same plate and to drink in unison; yet rather than rejoicing in a spirited “bottoms up” downing their drinks with arms interlocked, they exchange glasses with one another, slowly and solemnly drinking together. The bride and groom then proceed to lock their hands together tightly, symbolizing their unity, before proceeding to a final step in which each has a piece of hair cut from his or her head, and the two pieces of hair are tied together to represent, again, their intertwinement and inseparability. Each movement is accompanied by detailed narration by a considerably more subdued host than one would find at a standard wedding, along with frequent quotations from the Chinese classics explaining in the most complex and mystical of manners the deep meanings of each stage of the ritual.

From pre-ritual purification to interlocking hands, hair, and glasses, and from a solemn atmosphere to slow sips of wine, this ceremonial arrangement provides layer upon layer of meaning and solemnity, producing a vision of marriage far closer to a sacred ideal than the boisterous and disorderly “modern” wedding ceremony of the average urban resident. In a similar situation of social change and uncertainty, John Gillis’ study of the quest for supposedly



lost family values in America in the 1990s cites the rapid consecration and proliferation of “family time,” embodied in family dinners, bedtime, and such repeated celebrations as birthdays and anniversaries, which “turn all our events into ritual and image, all history into myth, in order to give ourselves some of the sense of permanence and connection that modern time denies us” (Gillis 1996:108). The isolated, easily controllable, yet symbolically sacred space of ritual at once provides a refuge from and a presumably efficacious site of defense against perceived social disintegration: the purportedly ancient Han rituals of marriage and other important life moments are granted recuperative powers in their ability not only to capture idealized images of past practice in the uncertain present in ways that simply donning Han Clothing cannot, but also to imaginarily revitalize the fundamental institutions of society through a return to stabilizing roots.

Such imagined ordering effects from ritual within a chaotic world were articulated particularly informatively by an interviewee who drew my attention to the word for a traditional Chinese festival, *jie* (節). While *jie* is generally understood as simply meaning a holiday or festival, as in Labor Day (五一勞動節) or the Spring Festival (春節), this informant argued that *jie* does not refer to “holidays” in the “Western” sense of the word, but rather means “a joint” or “a section.” Unearthing a deeper meaning, he argued that *jie* are in fact unstable or crisis-prone moments in the calendar divined by wise ancestors, and thus thresholds through which we must all pass. The ritualized practices associated with these particular moments are then designed to assist this passage: the world is thus envisioned as fundamentally imbalanced, alongside a complementary vision of mundane-turned-sacred practices righting this imbalance. For example, on the fifth day of the fifth month of the year, widely known as the Dragon Boat Festival, this

informant claimed that one is highly prone to develop stomach ailments; in order to prevent such problems, the tradition of eating wrapped glutinous rice (粽子) was developed. This, he argued, is the true meaning of “passing a holiday (過節);” it is a time that must be passed, and communal ritualized action, extending from the imperial palace to the households of the average Zhou, helps to ensure their smooth passage. “This is the wisdom of our ancestors,” he said with a smile. But the problem today, he noted, is that glutinous rice is just as likely to produce as to prevent stomach ailments.

These two adjacent statements succinctly capture the central contradiction facing movement participants: the tension of perceived eternal wisdom and eternal experiential disorder. Again, a tautology intertwines ritual and society in these imaginings: rituals are perceived as having played a central role in ordering society in the past; the perceived lack of order in contemporary society can then be attributed to the corresponding lack of ritual; as such, the revitalization of ritual would revitalize society and social order. In contrast to the inherently disorderly world in which we live, it is pleasant to envision a world ordered by ritual; and in opposition to the disorder and uncertainties of life, who could resist the image of a thoroughly ordered life whose progression is marked by a series of grandiose rituals, at once guiding and celebrating one’s smooth progression through life? As Han Clothing traces an imagined tradition of glory from the origins of humankind into the near past, the enactment of these purportedly ancient Han rituals then claims to provide a technique and a space in which this glory can be realized in the present. Yet as with the discussion of Han Clothing in the previous section, this imaginary ordering never lives up to its intended results. Han Clothing itself is an abstraction from the reality of lived society, and ritual adds another layer to this abstraction by creating an

imaginary space fleetingly removed from external realities, and a technique seemingly removed from the realities of the world. Nevertheless, these external realities always eventually find their way in.

My first interaction with movement devotees in Guangzhou was at a Song-style tea ceremony. Roughly twenty enthusiasts, dressed in Han Clothing in the still sweltering heat of Guangzhou in September, gathered in the apartment of a local professor to drink tea the way that it was once done by the ancestors. As we gathered around a table to watch the professor mix the finely ground tea in a bowl with water, he informed us of the seemingly magical properties of teas past: tea in the past contained seven times the nutrients of tea today, water was considerably cleaner and thus allowed for a purer taste when sampling tea, and people even washed their hair with tea leaves rather than with the pre-packaged and mass-manufactured shampoo that we all use nowadays. Yet after continually building our expectations for this little taste of heaven, just as the tea was almost ready to be shared in solemn, expectant sips, the ears of all present suddenly rang with the overwhelming sound of a drill; the clamor was so powerful that we could not hear one another speak, and almost instinctively lifted our hands, once folded together politely at waist level, to our aching ears. The professor held the bowl of tea in his hands, completely still, waiting for the drilling sound to cease; when it finally came to a sudden halt after an unbearably lengthy span of time, our host explained that the university was installing an elevator in the apartment building across from his, and expressed his regrets about the noise.

Quite a significant amount of drilling was completed that day. Having spent half of the past decade living in apartment buildings in China, I had become quite accustomed to drilling sounds, but the drill used that day for elevator installations was uniquely loud. And its

cacophony seemed to arise spontaneously at the most solemn and thus the most inconvenient of moments; after that first sound-shock, the ambiance of the tea ceremony never quite recovered. The memory of this impertinently obnoxious drill and its interruptions of the atmosphere that morning remained with me throughout the course of fieldwork, a reminder of the seemingly inescapable intrusion of reality into the ideal images and moments around which the Han Clothing Movement constructs itself. Yet I was soon to encounter a quite unexceptional yet also highly telling discovery, revealing the next level of pleasurable alienation towards the ideal of the real China: none of these intrusions were included in the photographs taken that day.

### **III. The Camera Obscura of National Fantasy**

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

-Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of The Essence of Christianity (Feuerbach 2008)

One February morning I made the lengthy trek from the southern edge of the city of Guangzhou to its northernmost point, the foot of Baiyun Mountain. I had been invited by a few local Han Clothing enthusiasts to view a cherry blossom display marking the beginning of spring: precisely the type of leisurely activity in intimate contact with one's natural surroundings that was in their fantasy construction the main focus of Han ancestors' lives. An air of quiet solemnity reigned as we sat at the entrance to Baiyun Mountain, but there was no ritual or other particularly sacred procedure underway; rather, the women of the group were painstakingly completing their hair and makeup. Although I arrived nearly half an hour late for our bright and

early 8:00am Saturday morning gathering, I had learned that the inevitable make-up process was a reliable buffer for anyone arriving late to events. The process continued for another twenty minutes after I had arrived, as the men of the group shuffled about, occasionally striking up conversations and occasionally providing advice and reassurance on hair and make-up. When all was finally in place, we made our way in to the cherry blossom exhibition, glanced at a few cherry blossom trees and the shockingly massive sea of people that had already gathered before 9:00am, and began what I discovered to be the true objective of this visit: taking pictures.



**Figure 17- Han Clothing enthusiasts posing for photographs, Baiyun Mountain, Guangzhou, February 2011**

Much like the willed isolation and resulting solemnity of the ritual space, proper photographs of Han Clothing could not be taken just anywhere, especially in the standard urban living environment of the average movement participant. The beauty, stability, and grandeur in the ideal image of “Han-ness” had to be represented not only in the clothing and figures embodied in the photograph, but also in the background. Baiyun Mountain provided the perfect backdrop: it was a natural setting, at once beautiful and imposing, with a green mountain stretching above, and colorful cherry blossoms all around. As such, beyond all of the talk about cherry blossoms and traditional culture, photography was to be the focus of the day. One fellow Han Clothing enthusiast had clearly been invited on account of his high-tech digital camera with an almost humorously long zoom lens; he was the designated cameraman, occasionally shouting out commands to the subjects of photographs like a high-profile fashion photographer. I had clearly been invited on account of my digital camera, as well as my repeatedly demonstrated willingness to take pictures as ordered, making me the reliable back-up photographer, ensuring that no magic moment was lost. We began with a few simple poses next to cherry blossoms, the results of which participants found pleasing. These successful first photographs seemed to have created a certain momentum, leading us on that long day to all types of increasingly complex poses: standing on the hillside, overlooking the expansive countryside below as if it were one’s own domain; standing on quite small rocks in the middle of a creek, presenting an image of balance and serenity despite the possibility of falling in and thereby ruining one’s quite elaborate outfit for later photographs; standing gallantly on top of a rock formation in the middle of the park, looking down solemnly towards one’s photographers, presenting an image as if one were elevated above others. Each photographic pose seemed to combine an ideal image of dignified

heroism and classical serenity, draped in five millennia of history: precisely the ego ideal that movement enthusiasts aimed to create.

The day literally lasted from eight o'clock in the morning past six in the evening. We had no food besides some instant noodles that we bought at a stand along the way. We never had a moment to pause and take in the scenes around us except as potential backdrops to yet another photograph. Nevertheless, what we did have was a group of well-dressed and made-up Han Clothing enthusiasts armed with digital cameras, producing pleasant imaginary memories of a day that never was. I left with over three-hundred new photographs on my camera, which I proceeded to spend endless hours distributing to participants online in the following days. The results were aesthetically pleasing, and as such quite pleasing to the participants. Yet beyond simply the result, the entire itself day was analytically fascinating, in that the suggestion that we “look at cherry blossoms,” a seemingly traditional, contemplative, and dignified activity, was in fact primarily a pretext to ensure that we could all look back at ourselves in certain dignified and abstracted poses for years to come.

Although this visit to Baiyun Mountain was distinctive in terms of the sheer and unrelenting intensity of photography, it was nevertheless not an exception. No matter the event, photography served as an essential part of Han Clothing gatherings. Taking pictures was, alongside clothing and ritual, another central concern of devotees, and as I discuss below, these three aspects of the movement complement each other. Needless to say, of course, photography was not an act in which the Han ancestors engaged. Yet beyond predictable anachronistic irony, which quickly grows tiring on account of its pervasiveness, the integration of one of the most modern of technologies into this traditionalist movement further reaffirms the fact that despite

the obsessive discussion of the power of tradition, the Han Clothing Movement is in fact a movement firmly based in and responding to present conditions, which photography finally allows participants to transcend, in search of an ego ideal, which photography finally allows participants to simulate.

### **The Reality of the Image**

One can't possess reality, one can possess images.

-Susan Sontag, On Photography (1977:141)

Han Clothing forums are literally plastered with images of participants dressed in Han Clothing; every Han Clothing devotee that I met had his or her collection of Han Clothing portraits; and every gathering of the Han Clothing Movement that I attended had its designated photographer for the day. Nevertheless, in contrast to the promotion of clothing and ritual, photography is a rarely spoken aspect of group activities; no description of the Han Clothing Movement suggests that “we, as members of the Han nationality, aim to revitalize our Han culture through the promotion of our national clothing and our traditional rituals; and we also really enjoy wandering around and taking pictures of one another.” The largely unspoken nature of photography suggests that, much like the widely disparaged activities of Chen Zhanbing and his Han Society, this practice lays bare a fundamental truth about the activities of the movement that participants would prefer to leave unspoken.

The fundamental tension traced through the drama of Han-ness examined in this and preceding chapters has been the disconnection between the ideals of “China” and “the Han” and the everyday experience of these ideas. Whereas these ideal images hover far above experience



as promises of the grandeur of one's community, they simultaneously present challenges as fundamental lacks seemingly perpetually incapable of realization: although Han Clothing, as a concrete material link passed down from the ancestors through five millennia, would seemingly stabilize the ideal image of Han-ness, this outfit remained fundamentally unable to resolve fundamental problems of the living environment in which enthusiasts found themselves, continually hounded by pollution, crowding, questions, stares, and mockery. And although ritual, as a mystified practice passed down from the ancestors over five millennia, created a safely quarantined space in which fantasies of the Han and the self therein could be realized, the continued intrusion of the external environment, the reality from which the Han Clothing Movement strives to escape, remained persistent in the form of unimpressed audiences, befuddled policemen, and untimely drills. Within this seemingly unending drama between ideals and material existence, photography injects an idealizing materiality into the formula as a perfect solution: photography is, like Han Clothing, stable and material, and, like ritual, capable of simultaneously framing and idealizing, continuing the logic of the previous two components of the movement to their logical conclusion in a frozen objectification of fantasy able to be kept and viewed repeatedly over time.

The idealizing function can be seen in the fact that every photograph is involved in the careful process of framing and preparation (Laruelle 2011), while nevertheless maintaining the image of transparent and unfiltered truth. Examining the usual process involved in taking a picture, one usually first locates oneself in front of some sort of appropriate backdrop, and then proceeds to pose and smile, while the photographer adjusts the frame to ensure that the image is centered and generally appealing, without any unexpected or unflattering additions. The majority of components in this formula were all addressed above, from make-up to backdrops to poses.

Yet the framing process reminds us that an important detail of a photograph is not only what it includes, but also what it excludes: nothing is more unsettling than a well-posed photograph against a pleasant backdrop which nevertheless includes a directionless bystander wandering by, or even worse a “photo-bombing” bystander who consciously disturbs the otherwise pleasing image through the addition of humorous facial expressions or the extension of certain fingers. Such intrusions distract from the center of attention and detract from the aura of the photograph. Yet while actively avoided in the process of taking a picture, such disturbances are seemingly naturally absent from the final photographic product, ideally presenting a coherent and peaceful image. Although this framing tendency has been part of the photographic process from its inception, the recent advent of the digital camera only further enhances this tendency by allowing for the immediate review of photographs, as well as providing a nearly infinite space for photographs in contrast to the traditional 24- or 36-exposure rolls of film, allowing subjects dissatisfied with first or second attempts to retake their shots repeatedly until they achieve the precise effects that they are seeking: a process which occupied large spans of time during movement gatherings. Even if intrusions or distractions are present in real life, as they inevitably are, there is not the slightest trace of these realities in the final image.

As one might expect from the intrusions that followed Han Clothing and movement rituals in previous sections, my day on Baiyun Mountain included many such disturbances: not only were there seas of people amidst the cherry blossoms, detracting somewhat from the “natural” aura, but Han Clothing, as always, attracted a massive crowd of onlookers staring, following, asking questions (“are you here to film a television series?”, “when does your performance begin?”), posing in front of, and even demanding particular poses from participants

(“move a little to the right- yeah, that’s good”). At one point, our presence had generated such a massive crowd that we were enclosed on all sides by fascinated photographers.



**Figure 18- Surrounded by onlookers, Baiyun Mountain, Guangzhou, February 2011**

Left with no choice, we climbed a steep hill on the edge of the exhibition grounds to find some breathing room, and, of course, take some pictures of our own without interference from the throngs of onlookers below. While the majority of the crowd stayed at the bottom of the hill, a few dedicated photographers decided to follow us uphill. To our amusement, one fellow with large Jiang Zemin-style glasses and a particularly high waistband grabbed my arm on the hillside and shouted “Hello! Picture?!?” in broken English. Slightly confused, I smiled and looked towards my acquaintances in Han Clothing, who glanced at him with a similarly confused look.

Failing to note the awkwardness of the situation, this photographer lifted his camera, took two photos of my confused companions, and yelled to them, again in English, “very good! Thank you!” before proceeding to shake my hand extremely vigorously. He then wandered back down the hill, as we wandered further up the increasingly steep hill, off the beaten track, to escape from the crowds.



**Figure 19- Pausing for a photograph while climbing away from and warding off spectators, Baiyun Mountain, Guangzhou, February 2011**

Thanks to the diligent avoidance efforts of my acquaintances and the reliable framing effects of the photograph, none of these distractions were apparent in our photographic retrospective. Each entry in this collection of images managed to portray carefully staged moments of isolation, unity with nature, and grandeur as an “actually existing situation” (Bourdieu 1990:76): in contrast to the crowds and the craziness, we found Han Clothing devotees standing gracefully in the midst of a gently flowing stream, gallantly atop boulders, or

triumphantly glancing across the countryside below. Each image thus presents a “neat slice of time” (Sontag 1977:13) removed from its often far less neat surroundings.

Previous sociological studies of photography have tellingly noted its role in the integration of the family unit (Bourdieu 1990:19). Family photographs are generally taken at moments of communal solidarity and happiness, such as family festivities or family vacations, ensuring that they capture pleasant memories. Afterwards, no matter the arguments or other tensions that plague family life, the decision to pull out a family photo album and view it together, reviewing these idealized moments, then brings about another moment of otherwise elusive integration and peace (Bourdieu 1990). This insight into the social function of photography is clearly relevant to the role of photography in the Han Clothing Movement. Movement photographs are similarly taken at moments and in settings that are carefully constructed in order to realize, finally, an otherwise elusive Han-ness: enacting a solemn ritual passed down through the millennia, pensively sipping a cup of tea, completing a calligraphic inscription of traditional poetry, or simply standing serenely in the midst of a creek, comfortable in the embrace of nature. These are poses and moments which enact the imagined and otherwise elusive essence of Han selfhood, while remaining through objectification immune to the disruptions that have plagued other attempts to “return to the eras of Han and Tang.” As such, they build upon the logic of clothing and ritual discussed above, continuing these integrating efforts towards their final yet always seemingly unattainable conclusion: the ideal image of the Han, produced in response to the challenges and discontents of the material world, and realized in a final act of abstraction from the reality of this material world in the objectified form of the photograph, in which it is presented as a transparent reality.

This idealized image of Han-ness can only be achieved fully through photography because this medium combines abstraction from the material world with a fundamental materiality and stability: whereas images are prepared, posed, framed, and edited, they are nevertheless generally understood as transparent and self-evident reflections of reality. When one sees a photograph of something, even a photograph of something that one has not seen with one's own eyes, the photograph is presumed to "furnish evidence" of the object or event captured therein, on account of this medium's fundamentally "innocent" and thus "accurate" relationship to visual reality (Sontag 1977:3). The seeming veracity and objectivity of the photograph (Bourdieu 1990:76) is expressed most memorably in Roland Barthes' observation that, in a photograph, the pipe is really just a pipe (Barthes 1981:5), realizing the status of Identity (Laruelle 2011). Similarly, the photography of the Han Clothing Movement hides the painstaking efforts involved in the production of this image, such that the Great Han is finally truly and simply the Great Han: the thoroughly constructed image of "Han-ness" in the path of the much-cited five millennia of tradition is finally made manifest in its full grandeur and sacredness.

Yet the photograph not only facilitates the construction of an imaginary world which is made to appear transparently real; it furthermore extends this emblematic moment across time. The abstraction which removes the image from the unpredictability and disorder of the surrounding world in which it would otherwise be lost is supplemented by the material stability of the image, which further abstracts this moment from the passage of time, in which it would otherwise pass and perhaps be forgotten. Reflecting upon this fundamentally mystifying and thus mesmerizing relationship between the photograph and the passage of time, Susan Sontag observes that "[l]ife is not about significant details, illuminated in a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are" (Sontag 1977:63-64). On a similar albeit unexpected note, André Bazin begins

his study of the ontology of the photographic image with a review of Egyptian practices of embalming the dead. Through this juxtaposition, Bazin brings to light what he calls the “mummifying” effects of photographic images, capturing moments and freeing them from the passage of time and the constraints of space that otherwise govern them, while nevertheless appearing completely natural (Bazin 2004). Photography thus enables its users to beautify and to eternalize, two of the central concerns of the Han Clothing Movement, producing an idealized and illusorily stable alienated self-image in response to the gray and perpetually unstable world in which they live.

These contributions to image construction, in the end, are why photography plays such a central role in Han Clothing activities, and stands out as such a cherished possession of Han Clothing devotees, a very “modern” companion to their “traditional” clothing. For the photograph’s integration and stabilization of the idealized image then finally realizes the integration and stabilization of the self, the original source and subject of Han troubles, within this image. Pierre Bourdieu usefully notes that throughout history, the ability to own a portrait of oneself has been an extremely rare privilege; only the wealthiest of individuals could procure a portrait, and even then such a labor-intensive undertaking could only be an image of one particular moment in time (Bourdieu 1990:30). The invention and proliferation of photographic technology over the past two centuries has drastically altered this situation, making the portrait vastly more available, and even placing the possibility directly in the hands of individuals in the form of the camera without, however, greatly devaluing the portrait’s distinction. Such portraits have proliferated throughout Chinese society over the past few decades, making everything from baby portraits to wedding portraits to family portraits core contributions to individuals’ perspectives upon themselves and understandings of their life course, and constructing an image

of the self seemingly just as worthy of worship as the portraits that hover over ancestral shrines. Bonnie Adrian has noted in her study of wedding photography in Taiwan that one is often hard-pressed to even recognize individuals in these photographic portraits (Adrian 2003), and people are so unlike their everyday selves that the “portraits might as well be paintings” (Adrian 2003: 204). Yet this is precisely the point. The tendency of the photograph to transform the photographed into a work of art (Sontag 1977:116) distanced from its reality, as well as presenting a seemingly objective certificate of presence (Barthes 1981:87) as reality finally allows for a self-projection that overcomes the fundamental gap in national existence, caught between the grandeur of nationalist discourses and the banalities and discontents of everyday existence. The integration of this ideal image is finally achieved by careful editing and abstraction from such material realities, capturing this abstraction as a fundamental reality and stabilizing it over time in the form of a photograph, with the self located in the center as a representative of the grandeur of the Han. It is then precisely by “making men and their circumstances appear upside-down” (Marx and Engels 1972:42) that the omnipresent *camera obscura* of the Han Clothing Movement becomes a *camera lucida* of national fantasy, producing and stabilizing an ideal image in an always less than ideal world.

## Conclusion

The fundamental driving force of the Han Clothing Movement is the integration and realization of the ideal image of “the Han,” and in turn an ideal image of the self: both of which are continually approached yet remain constantly elusive through the various assisting media discussed in this chapter. Han Clothing, as a first medium, is imagined as transmitting the sacred



from the era of the Yellow Emperor until the dawn of the Qing Dynasty, providing a lasting, stable, aestheticized and deeply symbolic embodiment of traditional culture that literally wraps its subjects in historical grandeur and meaning. Yet this image of the sacred was incongruent with the unabashedly profane living environment of the present. Ritual, as a second medium, responded to this dilemma by producing a quarantined space for fleetingly enacting this relationship to the sacred in the present towards the exercise of the type of imaginary power and control that is fundamentally lacking in movement participants' everyday experiences. Yet the aestheticized and protected bubble of the ritual space often proves too fleeting and vulnerable to interruptions. Photography, the most modern of practices at the core of this traditional movement, completes this process of realizing the "true Han" by capturing ideal moments in the present and transmitting them into the future as stable and undeniable truths. The process of materializing the reality of the imaginary ideal of Han-ness is then a process of continual abstraction from reality which reaches its pinnacle in the photograph's creation of a lasting material replica of the imaginary "real China."

## Chapter 6

### The Paranoid Style in Chinese Cultural Politics

The ideal images of Han-ness and Chineseness sought in the Han Clothing Movement face many worldly obstacles, as described in the preceding chapters, and can only be realized as identity ever so briefly through a process of ever rising levels of abstraction from subjects' actual living environment, culminating in the objectified image of photography. The profound elusiveness of this ideal founded upon the assumption of identity would seem to merit an explanation. During a dinner with Han Clothing devotees in Guangzhou early in my fieldwork, the movement's preferred explanation for this perpetual gap first came to my attention. Our discussion had turned to a comparison between Han Clothing and the considerably more popular *qipao* (旗袍) or *cheongsam*, often recognized as representative of traditional "Chinese" clothing in the present (Chew 2007). My acquaintances in the Han Clothing Movement were, to say the least, less than enthusiastic about the *qipao*'s high profile: "the *qipao* is for hookers (妓女) and sluts (騷 B) who love to expose themselves (走光). That is why the slit on the side of the leg stretches so high. It is a savage clothing style, for primitive people who ride horses." My acquaintances hurried to explain to me, as I already knew, that the *qi* in *qipao* meant "banner," a term closely associated with Manchu identity and rule during the Qing Dynasty. "Those people are savages," they said, "and they want to destroy us Han!"

Admittedly, I was surprised by the all too sincere hatred which Han Clothing Movement participants displayed towards the not so apparently detestable *qipao*. Yet just as movement participants insist that Han Clothing is primarily a symbol for a far more essential Chinese culture, so they insisted that the dominance of the *qipao* and *magua* in representations of China

was a symbol for a far more insidious process that had proceeded largely unnoticed by the majority of their compatriots: the Manchu nationality's determined efforts to seize political, cultural, economic, and military power in order to eliminate the Han nationality and destroy China. This unexpected turn in the conversation that evening suddenly opened onto a deluge of bizarre accusations against the Manchus: they are dedicated to beautifying and eventually reviving the Qing Dynasty against the Han; they have already infiltrated all levels of the state apparatus, and particularly dominate the cultural and educational bureaucracies; they love to kill Han babies; and their greatest enemy, which they are dedicated to eliminating, is none other than the Han Clothing Movement and its vision of the real China.

My initial suspicion that these sentiments might be the focus of only one wing of the movement were set aside as I heard similar narratives repeated almost word for word from other movement participants. And my suspicion that these obsessions might be derived from the local history of anti-Qing fervor and rebellion in Guangdong Province were similarly overturned as anti-Manchu vitriol literally followed me through every city that I visited over the course of my research. Throughout my research interactions, there was a reliable turning point in the dialogue with local groups, after establishing a certain degree of rapport, in which the topic of conversation would suddenly turn to "the Manchus," and I would listen amidst mixed emotions of curiosity and perplexity to the wide array of Manchu centered theories circulating throughout the movement, such that my fieldnotes eventually became a virtual encyclopedia of quite untenable beliefs about the secret power of these supposed savages. This chapter examines these theories and other similar conspiracy theories, both within the Han Clothing Movement and beyond, so as to explain the seduction, in the face of the very real challenges of the world, of a fundamentally unreal theory of this world and its challenges. I argue that conspiracy theories and

the dilemmas of national and ethnic identity analyzed in previous chapters are intertwined, emerging as two sides of the same coin, insofar as conspiracy theory can only be based in identity, and, correspondingly, only the externalizing and explanatory functions of conspiracy theory can preserve the elusive ideal of identity.

### **I. The Manchurian Candidates**

I begin this analysis of the relationship between conspiracy and identity by presenting a summary of the various beliefs surrounding Manchus within the Han Clothing Movement, with commentary and analysis reserved for a later section of the chapter. The goal in this section is to provide a basic review of the “facts” as they stand with regard to the average movement enthusiast’s vision of “the Manchus.” There is an abundance of such “facts,” for as Richard Hofstadter has demonstrated in his study of the “paranoid style in American politics,” conspiracy theories are structured around the careful accumulation of seeming proof towards a narrative “full of rich and proliferating detail” (Hofstadter 1965:24, 36). Of course, many of the “facts” described in this section are at best silly and untenable, or at worst ludicrous and offensive. Nevertheless, in order to understand the power and appeal of these ideas as a whole, it is necessary to present them within their “emic” context.<sup>21</sup>

According to Han Clothing Movement narratives, the Han and the Manchu nationalities have been engaged in a longstanding racial war. Historically, the first step in this showdown was the rise of the Qing Dynasty. Prior to the rise of the Qing, movement narratives assert that there

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<sup>21</sup> In an attempt to reflect movement discourses for the reader, the following paragraphs will use the terms “the Manchus” and “the Han” without quotation marks or other clearly necessary disclaimers, despite the inherently complex nature of these two seemingly simple words.

was a clear distinction between Chinese and barbarians (華夷之辨): the two groups reportedly lived separate lives, and as a result, all was well. Yet the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, described in a curious appropriation of contemporary official rhetoric against official narratives as an “external power” (外國勢力), marked the end of this idyllic state of affairs. Within movement narratives, this shift was inscribed upon Han bodies through the enforcement of the queue and the elimination of Han Clothing: “it was from this moment that the clothing of the Chinese people, Han Clothing, which had been passed from one generation to another from the beginning of time to the beginning of the Qing, suddenly disappeared from this world.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas in the past barbarians (夷) had become Chinese (華), this historical moment marks a turning point, wherein Chinese were forced to adopt barbarian ways.

The results of this inversion, according to movement narratives, were disastrous. Chinese culture, which movement participants believe was an immaculate and pure entity prior to the beginning of the Qing, rapidly underwent a vulgarization whose effects can still be seen to this day. Loudness, rudeness, forcing others to drink (勸酒), crowding together, cutting in line, sharing dishes, spitting, “country bumpkin (土包子)” behavior, over-the-top and colorful (花) portrayals of the gods, feudal superstition, lack of innovation, lack of hygiene, shrill Mandarin unsuited to reading classical Tang poems, fear of authority, picking on the weak, crass materialism, bribery, state-sponsored massacres, and countless other unpleasant phenomena imagined and perceived are all rendered as recent imports from the Manchu invaders. The erasure of Han Clothing, in movement histories, thus led to nothing less than the erasure of pure

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<sup>22</sup> 大国之殇——汉服消亡史《文明的失落与复兴》(Elegy for a Great Country- The Loss and Revitalization of Civilization, a History of the Disappearance of Han Clothing, *Tianya Forum*, March 9, 2007 (accessed February 6, 2013), <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-no01-304938-1.shtml>.

Chinese culture. And this erasure of pure Chinese culture, in turn, led to the destruction of the imperial system, an essential representation of this culture and its glory. As one movement devotee told me, “allowing primitive, illiterate, horse-riding people to steal the mandate of heaven? Nothing good could ever come of that.”

And indeed, according to movement narratives, nothing positive was derived from the rise of the Qing. The bemoaned century of humiliation and the eventual downfall of the imperial system as a whole are viewed as the results of pure barbarian incompetence. Yet the Xinhai Revolution which overthrew the Qing and thus would seem to have ended Manchu rule is viewed as only the first counter-strike in a lengthy struggle that lasts to this day. For the failure to achieve their objective of destroying the Han during the Qing only made the Manchus ever more determined. In the Republican era, the Manchus naturally collaborated with the Japanese toward their common goal of destroying China, thereby explaining the origins of the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo, and signaling the internationalization and intensification of the struggle. Viewed through this lens, the Chinese Communist Party which came to power soon after the conclusion of World War II was not so much a revolutionary party or a communist party as it was an anti-Manchu party, determined to eradicate remaining Manchu power structures. Reflecting upon the history of the twentieth century, one movement participant described the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 as a “political anti-Manchu revolution,” in that it overthrew the rule of the Qing Dynasty. The “Liberation” from 1945 to 1949 was a “military anti-Manchu revolution,” in that it fought against the Manchu-Japanese alliance, eliminated the power of the northeastern warlords, and ensured that there could be no further external invasions of Chinese territory. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1969 was then an attempt at a “cultural anti-Manchu revolution.” After hearing this absurd yet also absurdly consistent review of the

history of the past century, I could not help but inquire how an activist dedicated to revitalizing “Chinese tradition” could possibly hold a positive view of the Cultural Revolution: brushing my question aside as a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues at hand, he responded that all of the positive aspects of traditional Chinese culture had already been lost long before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution as a result of Manchu malfeasance, and that this unprecedented movement’s main target was not in fact “Chinese tradition” but rather the insidious presence of Manchu influence within Chinese culture: it is thus logically possible within the movement to embrace both traditional culture and Mao Zedong. However, despite achieving some victories, such as the suicide of novelist and supposed “hired thug of Manchu propaganda” Lao She, the Cultural Revolution as an anti-Manchu cultural revolution failed and was thus followed, in the next stage in this unyielding racial war, by the restoration of Manchu rule following Mao’s death.

The restoration of Manchu rule? Indeed, you read that sentence correctly. As the Cultural Revolution has been retroactively reinterpreted as a war against “Manchu culture,” so the post-1976 era of reform and opening has been reinterpreted as the feared revenge of the Manchus. One popular yet thoroughly peculiar movement history of this Manchu plot begins by describing recent decades as follows:

The Manchu independence cabal, with the overwhelming support of international anti-China forces, has grown increasingly dedicated and unforgiving in its attempts to split the motherland in recent decades. It has furthermore developed alliances with the Taiwan Solidarity Union, the East Turkestan Movement, the Tibetan and Mongolian independence movements, and Falun Gong, forming a conglomerate dedicated to destroying the motherland. The capitalist roaders in power rely upon the old aristocracy of the Manchu bannermen to continue to survive, and to thus continue their traitorous selling out of the country. Meanwhile, the Manchu aristocracy relies upon these capitalist

roaders in order to realize their aspirations of splitting the nation and returning to power.<sup>23</sup>

The vision presented here is of a nationality, of which the narrator is a member, dwelling alone in a world surrounded by conniving enemies and internal capitalist roaders working in concert toward the ideal of making life difficult for the Han and thwarting the realization of the ideal Han polity. For the moment, let us first consider the evidence compiled to support this perplexing worldview of the post-Mao era as an era of Manchu rule.

According to movement narratives, the post-Mao political turn against the Han occurs almost simultaneously with the start of the reform era. This turn's most representative event, in devotees' eyes, is the appointment of presumed Manchu Tian Xueyuan as director of the Population Research Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1979. Soon after his appointment, Tian became the architect of the one-child policy, or as movement participants refer to it, the "Han one-child policy." This contribution to state policy has earned Tian the title "Manchu dog" and "anti-Han eliminationist" amongst Han Clothing Movement participants, who are also not opposed to occasional harassing emails, phone calls, or death threats. The intricacies of the Movement's reinterpretation of the one-child policy are discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter, as this case stands out as a particularly telling example of the logic of these conspiracy theories. Before we proceed to analyze this case in more detail, however, there remain an abundance of further dastardly deeds in which the Manchus are engaged in the present to discuss.

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<sup>23</sup> 满独运动最近大事记[Major events in the recent history of the Manchu independence movement], December 2011 (accessed February 12, 2013). [http://www.xinhanminzu.com/dv\\_rss.asp?s=xhtml&boardid=45&id=19782&page=1](http://www.xinhanminzu.com/dv_rss.asp?s=xhtml&boardid=45&id=19782&page=1)



Much as Henry Ford in his conspiratorial anti-Semitic “classic” *The International Jew* provided a detailed list of the institutions and industries controlled by “the Jew,” Han Clothing Movement participants have gone to great lengths to document the saturation of all levels of contemporary Chinese society by “the Manchu.” The most significant of these realms of control is naturally the government, an entity of unrivaled power in contemporary China. Just as Ford claimed that “the single description which will include a larger percentage of Jews than members of any other race is this: he is in business” (Ford 2007:8), so movement participants would assert that the single description which will include a larger percentage of Manchus than members of any other nationality is this: he is in government. The seemingly detailed documentation of Manchus, including both open, self-declared Manchus and furtive, disguised Manchus in various state bureaucracies, paints a picture of a state apparatus thoroughly infiltrated by the other. Yet whereas Ford, in a moment of what Adorno memorably described as “friendly” Anti-Semitism (Adorno 2002:204), attributes the success of “the Jew” to his “vigor, resourcefulness and special proclivities” (Ford 2007:12), the Manchu in Han Clothing narratives benefits from no such spiteful flattery. Instead, the success of the Manchus in reform-era government is described as a result of their natural tendency for and skill in corruption. This is, as stated above, a skill which is purportedly a foreign import derived first from Manchu influence in the Qing, a skill which is also purportedly, according to a number of informants, innate within the very DNA of the Manchu, and a skill which is clearly essential to a successful career in the contemporary Chinese state. This cleverness in corruption, a skill for the times, means that the Manchus easily climb to the top of the state bureaucracy in movement beliefs, eventually coming to oversee all essential government functions. The infiltration is so severe, in fact, that movement narratives assert that the “three northeastern provinces” (a term derived from Qing-era terminology which refers to

contemporary Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang), are able to operate virtually autonomously thanks to their protectors in high places; the quantity of “autonomous regions (自治區),” “autonomous counties (自治縣),” and “autonomous villages” (自治村) in these provinces leads movement participants to assume that the Manchus have already achieved partial success in their goal of shattering China’s unity. Of course, such a conclusion can only be based in a far too literal interpretation of the word “autonomy (自治)” from a majority perspective, which is read, in fact, far more literally than any similarly concerned member of a minority nationality could ever consider plausible.

Manchu political power is reportedly particularly concentrated in the Ministry of Culture (文化部) and the Propaganda Department (中宣部). Much as Ford argued that “the Jews” controlled the modern press as means toward the realization of world domination (Ford 2007:237), so it is argued that the Manchus control the operations of the press toward their goal of revitalizing the Qing and destroying the Han. Of course, considering their sheer power and overwhelming lack of transparency, no two institutions could be any riper for conspiracy theories than the Ministry of Culture and the Propaganda Department. Yet the evidence cited by movement enthusiasts to support their case of Manchu cultural infiltration is quite revealing of the contradictions of cultural and historical representation in contemporary China. Over the past two decades, prime time on China Central Television has become the home of multiple mini-series depicting the great rulers of the past (Zhong 2010), with a particular focus upon the last dynasty, the Qing (Zhu 2005). In my analysis, these series are primarily paeans to political power, representing the ideal of the strong state as the longstanding and unchanging “Chinese way,” and thereby not so subtly rationalizing the excesses and stagnations of the contemporary strong state

as a cultural tradition. For Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts, however, these series are solely about ethnic relations and power: a propaganda front in the Manchu war on the Han, beautifying the Qing to prepare for its eventual restoration. A movement enthusiast in Chengdu told me, “the Manchus control the Propaganda Department, and they use this position to promote their rule and the restoration of the Qing. How else could you explain all of these endless movies about the so-called benevolent rule of Kangxi and Qianlong?” Within the movement, these Qing centered films are described as “queue films” (辮子戲), tying them directly to the humiliating bodily marker of Manchu domination from which the historical downfall of the Han began. Another participant in Guangzhou claimed that Manchus within the state cultural apparatus had issued a ban on all “good” television series about the past: namely, series with the word “Han” in their name, such as “Great Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty” (漢武大帝) and “Great Han Empire” (大漢帝國). Instead, he told me, “they just show their movies beautifying pigtails. They’re horrible.” In a colorful twist, Bernardo Bertolucci’s Oscar winning film “The Last Emperor” is viewed as part of the Manchu conspiracy: according to one Han Clothing activist, the film again expands the Manchu-Han battle to an international level by propagandizing for Pu Yi’s rule and, in later sections of the film, demonizing Han state power and Han Red Guards.

This far-reaching political and cultural power easily translates into power in other areas. In the military, the widespread and ultimately unfounded rumor that China’s first aircraft carrier was to be named after the “traitor” Shi Lang, commander in chief of Qing fleets in the 1600s, signaled to Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts that the military had been taken over by the Manchu cabal. In the field of education, similar to the curious conservative backlash against “ethnic studies” in the United States (Carcamo 2013), rumors ran rife throughout the movement

during my fieldwork that vaguely defined compulsory courses in “Manchu culture” were being developed for the nation’s middle-school students. Affirmative action policies for the national college entrance examination, which add a certain amount of points to the scores of ethnic minority students, are similarly taken as evidence that the cards are stacked against the Han nationality in higher education: a conclusion which anyone who has spent any time in a Chinese university is likely to find fairly perplexing. In real estate, the completely unrealistic housing prices in most Chinese cities, a result of rampant speculation, are attributed to the influence of Manchus who use real estate to shelter their corrupt gains. The financial sector, a particular point of focus in Henry Ford’s discussion of “the Jews,” has emerged as a new and uncertain frontier in this battle, with Manchus purportedly eager to ruin the infamously volatile Chinese stock market. And in food production, such chains as the Qiao Jiangnnan Group (僑江南集團) are accused of being fronts for the Manchu independence movement, cunningly serving non-Manchu food cooked in gutter oil so as to poison Han customers, shorten their lives, and render them infertile.

The result of this rich plethora of conspiracy theories is an image of foreign Manchu control extending through politics, culture, media, national defense, education, finance, and even the food chain, attesting to “the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (Hofstadter 1965:14). Having now established a basic outline of the admittedly odd beliefs surrounding the Manchu within Han Clothing narratives, the following section analyzes the logics and motivations behind the construction of this massive and fundamentally imaginary ideological state apparatus: why have Manchus been cast as the arch-enemy within the Han

Clothing imaginary? What role does this massive Manchu conspiracy serve within the Han Clothing Movement's understanding of China and the world? And what needs, in the end, does this theory of the world satisfy?

## **II. The Manchu in the Mirror**

### **A. Conspiracy Theory and Identity**

Conspiracy theories existing on the margins of society have entered the mainstream of academic studies in recent decades, generating fascinating discussions about the proliferation and power of these ideas (Barkun 1997; Fenster 1999; Keeley 1999; Knight 2002; Song 2010; West and Sanders 2003). Yet no single interpretation seems able to explain the sheer vitality and power of the conspiracy theory as a genre. Seeking to account for this power, I propose that conspiracy's appeal is a product of its intertwinement with, and affirmation of, an otherwise untenable ideal of identity.

Considering the structure of conspiracy theories, such as the Manchu conspiracy theories detailed above, we can see two primary processes in their representation of the world which reveal their relationship with identity: a founding division and an all-encompassing explanation. First, any conspiracy theory divides the world into "us" and "them," generally attributing positive characteristics to "us" and negative and conniving characteristics to "them." In the case of the Manchu conspiracy theories studied here, the primary distinction is "Han" and "Manchu." In the case of the majority of Chinese nationalist conspiracy theories (Liu, et al. 1996), the primary distinction is "China" and "the West" (or "Japan"). In the case of the best-known global

conspiracy theory of the domination of “the Jews,” the primary distinction is between “us” (whoever is speaking) and “the Jew.” In the case of paranoia in American politics, a primary distinction is an imagined “people” and “the government,” or between “white Christians” and “others.” And in the case of Marxism as a political worldview, the primary distinction is “the proletariat” and “the capitalists.” In each of these representations, the world is divided into simplistic and easily intelligible binaries, with clear characteristics attributed to each side: this division and attribution is also a founding process in identification, which is based in an understanding of oneself in relation to others.

Second, after dividing the world into “us” and “them,” conspiracy theories proceed to explain everything in the world according to this framework. This division is then not envisioned simply as one reason among others, but rather imagined to be the sole reason: the reason that can explain anything and everything, thereby mapping the entire world in accordance with the founding distinction of identity. In “Of Conspiracy Theories,” Brian Keeley notes that “explanatory reach” and “unity of explanation” are among the primary virtues of a conspiracy theory, insofar as they organize errant facts into a seemingly comprehensive narrative (Keeley 1999). This insight is immediately observable in the actual practice of conspiracy theory production; insofar as once one believes in a conspiracy theory, the culprit identified in this theory (“them”) is able to provide a certain answer for seemingly any and all events. Accordingly, in the examples provided above, the theory of the Manchu cabal provides an explanation for matters large and small, extending from table manners to corruption, and from tedious television mini-series to the frustrating one-child policy. The actual causes of these phenomena are manifold and complex, and of course cannot be attributed in reality to the machinations of Manchus behind the scenes: in fact, in reality, these phenomena cannot be separated from the

actions of those classified as “Han,” often acting against fellow Han. Yet in addition to the pressures of reality, the often far more burdensome pressures of identity drive movement participants to suppress the fact that these are phenomena that “we” do to “us,” and then to imagine another explanation: this explanation, based in the distinction between Han and Manchu, in turn reproduces this distinction of Han and Manchu by mapping positive aspects of the world onto the former and negative aspects of the world onto the latter. The maintenance of a unified and ideal image of the Han is thus achieved through the maintenance of a corresponding unified and negative image of “them,” the Manchus, achieving the ultimate realization of identity as a stable and fully encompassing reality in the world.

Conspiracy theory and identity are therefore intertwined processes. Conspiracy theories could not exist without identity and its attribution of particular characteristics to particular types, allowing for the distinction of “us” and “them.” Yet because of the elusiveness and uncertainty of identity as described in the previous chapters, identity needs conspiracy theory in order to illusorily map the world based upon its distinctions and explain away its perpetual failures. The primary role of conspiracy theory, then, is to divide the world into two so as to be able to explain it as a unity; or to divide the world along the lines of “us” and “them,” and to proceed to explain everything in the world based upon that distinction, so as to affirm a particular and illusorily coherent worldview structured around a positive “us” in contrast to a negative “them,” the foundation of identity. The overly detailed conspiracy theories described above, incorporating everything from economics to birth control, thus collect phenomena from reality that disrupt the identity of the ideal Han, and provide an all-encompassing explanation by attributing these phenomena to an exterior party: the Manchus.

## **B. The Manchu as the Core of Han Identity**

But, why Manchus? Why does this path back towards the grandeur of Han and Tang make an anachronistic rest stop in the anti-Manchu fervor of 1911? Two primary components of Manchu-ness contribute to the emergence of the Manchu as the primary explanatory force within the Han Clothing Movement: the status of the Manchu as a former external ruler, and the Manchu's indistinguishable nature in the present.

Historically, we should remember that unlike Henry Ford's "Jew," who never actually had the chance to "run the world" (an utterly impossible proposition in and of itself), "the Manchus" did in fact rule China, which, for many nationalists, would arguably constitute "the world." Furthermore, the nature of Qing rule, combining as it did a despotic iron fist and a rapidly disintegrating imperium, makes it an ideal projection screen for Han anxieties. As described in the previous section, the Qing is arguably best known for its queue order: the notion that one must lose one's hair if one does not wish to lose one's head, engrained in historical memory, embodies arbitrary despotism at its finest. This despotism furthermore coincided with notable imperial disintegration in the later periods of the Qing. Although the trope of the "century of humiliation," consisting of a series of military defeats, the establishment of colonial concessions, and the disintegration of imperial power are often attributed in official histories to the dual enemies of imperialism and feudalism, the fact remains that these events happened from a racial perspective under Manchu rule: a fact that Han Clothing enthusiasts never hesitate to emphasize. Through a particular and admittedly simplistic reading of history, Manchu rule can thus become the embodiment of despotism and disintegration.



The matter of most fundamental importance, however, is not that the Manchus can be tied to despotism and disintegration: after all, despite the claims of many movement participants, the Qing was certainly not the first dynasty to which these descriptions could apply. Rather, in addition to these negative historical associations, the Manchu furthermore exists outside of “the Han” in modern identity politics, and thus serves within these conspiracy theories’ explanatory division of the world at once as a receptacle for Han projections and as a protector of Han identity.

For example, the Han Clothing Movement is founded upon the idealization of the imperial past and its supposedly well-ordered ideal society as a “true” Han society. By emphasizing the Qing’s “foreign” Manchu nature, a coherent vision of late imperial and early modern history emerges that separates the imperial system from its own shortcomings through the movement’s cherished distinction of nationality. Despotism is conveniently externalized as a uniquely Manchu import to what was formerly a pure and purely benevolent political system, also known not so humbly as “the unity of heaven and earth.” And the disintegration of the dynastic system in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century is thus not to be attributed to the shortcomings of this political model itself within the modern world, but rather to its misappropriation by a presumed inferior set of rulers. In discussions about the 1911 Revolution with Han Clothing enthusiasts, the collapse of the Qing and the collapse of the imperial system are viewed as completely different matters: the former positive and the latter clearly negative. This distinction allows for a rehabilitation of the imperium as a well-oiled and smoothly functioning machine that represented an infallible Han culture.

While the Manchu conspiracy theory can rescue imperial history from its downfall, the theory serves a similar externalizing function in the present, wherein the arbitrariness, instability, and uncertainty of the social system can be felt all too intimately. The preceding list of dastardly deeds supposedly enacted by “the Manchus” is essentially a detailed index of the various social and political issues that have emerged in recent decades in China. Corruption, unaccountability, arbitrary censorship and intrusive policies, state violence, crowding, rudeness, crass materialism, overpriced real estate, uncertain stock markets: these are issues which are often created by those described as Han, while also creating problems for those described as Han. As the “majority” constituting roughly 92% of the current population of the nation and as the “core nationality” clearly not under-represented in positions of political, economic, social, and cultural power, actual relations of power would suggest that contemporary Chinese society is a largely Han-produced society.<sup>24</sup> Yet just as Henry Ford, a capitalist, was conveniently able to attribute the shortcomings of the capitalist system to the external “Jew” (Ford 2007:23), who served as the transcendent super-capitalist explaining away the more intimately experienced daily troubles of the market system, so for those who have been initiated into the supposed explanatory truth of continued Manchu rule, one can enjoy the fleeting, imaginary relief that these sources of frustration are not enacted by Han upon other Han: instead, they are the products of Manchu harassment and abuse of the Han towards the goal of suppressing the real Han and thus the real China.

The Manchu thus plays the role of the devil of national theodicy, explaining away all within the real China that fails to correspond to the idea of “the real China” as the product of

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<sup>24</sup> By this, I of course do not mean to imply that the current social and cultural situation is the natural outcome of some sort of intrinsic “Han-ness,” but rather that those who are labeled as “Han” and thus believe themselves to be Han have played a central role in the development and functioning of society as it stands at the moment.

Manchu malfeasance. The Han is thereby re-presented not as the core nationality and thus creator of the current state of affairs, but rather as the chosen yet downtrodden victim of a cruel external conspiracy, successfully employing the paranoid theme of persecution central to conspiracy theory as a genre (Hofstadter 1965:4) towards particularly narcissistic ends. The image produced by the sum total of conspiracy theories within the movement is of a veritable Manchu ideological state apparatus engaged in constant and unending war with the core nationality, the Han. As a result, a coherent and unified “Han-ness” which is lacking in everyday experience, wherein “the Han” is experientially divided into rulers and ruled, rich and poor, or local and outsider, is rediscovered in united opposition to the crimes of the ruthlessly unified and predatory Manchus. And a coherent and unified vision of the idyllic true Han society extending from the beginning of time is rediscovered, emerging unscathed from the cruel depredations of reality. These theories then express real anxieties about the ideas and experiences of “China” and “the Han” through a purifying ethnic metaphor which comfortingly externalizes the sources of the anxiety as the work of others.

In addition to providing an ideal symbol for reassuring externalization on account of history and ethnic relations, another characteristic of Manchu-ness in the present makes this figure a particularly effective medium for conspiracy theory, and particularly for the task of explaining everything and anything: namely, the Manchu’s indiscernible nature. Discussing the Han Clothing Movement’s often perplexing theories with a close friend of Manchu descent in Guangzhou, he commented exasperatedly, “We Manchus have been completely Sinicized/ Hanified (i.e. 漢化) over the past century. We don’t have any land, or any customs, or any distinguishing features. Our language is almost dead. So how can these people claim that we run

all of China? Fuck, does it look like I run this country?” Although this comment first reminds us of the quite considerable changes in the status of the “Manchu nationality” over the past century, upon further analysis, it also contains the answer to its own question: for the Manchu is not only foreign, but also often indistinguishable from his or her ethnic neighbors in the present. It is then precisely because “the Manchus” have been thoroughly Sinicized or Han-ified and have neither strongly distinguishing features, nor customs, nor language that they can be imagined as the omnipotent and omnipresent cabal secretly running the country, able to be found anywhere and everywhere, and thus able to explain anything: as conspiracy theorists are wont to do.

Drawing upon Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the figure of “the Jew” (Žižek 1989:89), I have analyzed elsewhere the perceived threat of “Cantonese” pollution in reform-era China, wherein “the imagined combination of both uncanny similarity and essential difference makes the potential misrecognition of these contaminating and foreign bodies all the more dangerous” (Carrico 2012:33). This combination is again present in the figure of the foreign yet indistinguishable “Manchu” in Han Clothing narratives. The founding division of “us” and “them” in this conspiracy theory presumes that “those not of our type are naturally different (非我族類，其心必異),” a presupposition reflected in and reinforced through the Han-ists’ cartoonish construction of the Manchu as a villainous group intent upon eliminating the Han as a whole. Yet this essential difference, presumably reaching deep into the very heart of each and every one of the Manchus, is made all the more threatening by the indistinct nature of “the Manchus” as an ethnic group in contemporary China, permitting their potential camouflaged blending amidst good Han. The Manchu can be imaginarily seen anywhere because they are not really anywhere, constituting a minute fraction of the population of China, and enabling them to

be doing anything in the Han Clothing imagination because they are not actually doing anything particularly distinct as an ethnic group in reality, thereby permitting the perpetual expansion of the Manchu conspiracy theory as an explanation for everything anywhere. The non-distinct Manchu nature is thus reminiscent of the standard and “blank” construction of Han-ness described in Chapter 3: just as the lack of ethnic characteristics in the Han provides a blank canvas for Han Clothing activists to develop and attempt to enact their ideal image of “Han-ness,” so the lack of distinct ethnic characteristics in the modern Manchu provides a similarly blank canvas for Han Clothing activists to embellish their imaginary enemy and discover him wherever and whenever he may be necessary, thereby exercising explanatory control over an often inexplicable world. What is presented as a threat within conspiracy theory (“the Manchu”) is then in fact a source of enjoyment which is acted out in the perpetual expansion of the conspiracy narrative and its explanatory colonization of the world, providing an expansive “unifying interpretive frame” without any restrictions or end (cf. Fenster 1999:xvii, 77-78).

Conspiracy theory’s affirmation of identity through all-encompassing explanation is demonstrated in a revealing example from the beginning of my fieldwork in the fall of 2010, when Han Clothing participants were widely discussing an egregious act perpetrated by “the Manchus” in Chengdu. According to the narrative circulating at the time, a crowd infiltrated by Manchus had surrounded a woman wearing Han Clothing downtown. Leaders of the crowd proceeded to publicly strip the trapped enthusiast of her Han Clothing, burning the clothing to the cheers of the assembled crowd. Every element of this event fit into the schema of the “evil Manchus” outlined above: their hatred of the Han and thus Han Clothing, their brazenness and passion for inflicting embarrassment and pain, and their utter unpredictability. Indeed, every element fit, with just one slight exception: this event was not orchestrated, overseen, nor enacted

by the accused Manchus. If this story sounded familiar to readers, it is because this supposed Manchu outrage was in fact the event described in the previous chapter, wherein a group of overzealous anti-Japanese protestors misinterpreted Han Clothing as a kimono. It was then precisely on account of the presumed evil of “the Manchu” and his indistinguishable nature from the “the Han” that this act of misrecognition was transformed through another act of self-absolving misrecognition. Seeing the senseless brutality of this event in Chengdu, yet unwilling to accept the reality that this was an internal Han affair, something that one group of Han did to another, this tall tale claiming that a conniving group of Manchus led a raucous crowd in a secret attack on the recently resurgent Han Clothing Movement comfortingly serves to externalize and reassuringly explain away a thoroughly discomfiting event, reaffirming a unified Han identity in the process.

Considering the role of these conspiracy theories in contemporary society, they not only serve to externalize and explain away unpleasant realities; at the same time, they also provide a final site of support for otherwise untenable identificatory imaginaries. For in constructing a vision of the world in which the inequalities, discontents, and disturbances of daily life are solely the products of Manchu malfeasance, these theories at the same time allow movement participants to imagine a world free from these disturbances, premised in the imaginary removal of the Manchus from their imaginary positions of power and the subsequent realization of Han-ness. Conspiracy theories, in their negative portrayals of contemporary realities, are thus based in the belief that a positive alternative is possible: these fundamentally untenable and unrealistic theories of negative realities thus provide refuge for positive ideals and imaginaries that are otherwise untenable and unrealistic. And they imaginarily empower their believers, reassuring them that because they are “in the know” (Adorno 2000) they are one step closer to the

realization of the ideal vision that they seek, whether this vision is an ideal life, an ideal state, or an ideal society.

Each of these steps in conspiracy theory, from division and externalization, to the reassuring unity of explanation, to the resuscitation of other otherwise untenable ideals of identity, are essential to the most elaborately detailed articulation of the Han Clothing Movement's Manchu narrative: the idea that the one-child policy is a Manchu imposition. This example, undoubtedly the most cited and emotionally salient conspiracy theory among movement participants, is uniquely revealing not only in its portrayal of the Manchu, but also in its portrayal of the relationship between the government and the governed. For amidst all of these perplexing and fundamentally unreal narratives about the Manchu, I argue that we can find a grain of truth providing the foundation for a theoretical reexamination of the experience of political power itself.

### **III. The Stranger King, Redux**

Society is made of those whom it comprises. If the latter would fully admit their dependence on man-made conditions, they would somehow have to blame themselves, would have to recognize not only their impotence but also that they are the cause of this impotence and would have to take responsibilities which today are extremely hard to take. This may be one of the reasons why they like so much to project their dependence upon something else, be it a conspiracy of Wall Street bankers or the constellation of the stars (Adorno 2002:154).

The one-child policy, one of contemporary China's most controversial state policies, was first enacted in 1979. And despite repeated suggestions of and hopes for a relaxation in controls, the policy remains in place today, thirty-four years later. Putatively derived from the "scientific" macro-level goal (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005) of keeping population on par with material

development (White 2006:62-63), at the personal “micro-level” the policy restricts most couples from having more than one child. Likely the widest reaching compulsory reproductive policy in modern history, recreating the once seemingly natural process of childbirth as the business of the state, the policy is enforced by a massive and quite vigilant bureaucracy extending through every level of social life to ensure that couples have only one child. This bureaucracy’s actions to meet its macro-targets are often quite unpleasant experiences for subjects: official harassment, kidnapping, forced sterilization, and forced abortion are some of the widely and at times quite disturbingly documented (Mosher 1983, Pan 2005) effects of the policy. And although discussions of the policy and its implementation are often intertwined with mystifying discourses of Eastern “collective values,” or mistakenly confused with the abortion debate, a more nuanced perspective would recognize that neither of these considerations is particularly applicable in this case. On the one hand, the harsh means required for compliance logically contradict the assumption of innate Chinese “collective values.” On the other hand, this policy is not only clearly not “pro-life,” whatever one may take this to mean, but also clearly not pro-choice, insofar as the implementation of this policy denies subjects any right to choose.

Yet my goal here is not to begin a lengthy analysis of the implications and inevitable complications of this policy. Instead, my goal is to examine the role of this policy in Han Clothing imaginaries, particularly as it relates to the Manchu conspiracy theories which are the focus of this chapter. And just as the Kafka-esque Propaganda Department noted above provides particularly fertile ground for conspiracy theories, a state policy designed to intervene in and manage a quite intimate and personal process unsurprisingly generates similar conspiratorial sentiments. The sheer intrusiveness and rationalized irrationality of the one-child policy and its implementation thus provide powerful fuel for the Han Clothing Movement’s Manchu



conspiracy engine. Alongside the resulting predictable hyperbole and paranoid imaginaries, a very real exception to the policy serves as the foothold for these theories. For although members of the majority Han nationality are limited to having only one child, the members of officially recognized minority nationalities enjoy comparatively relaxed family planning restrictions, permitting them (at least in theory) to have two, three, or even in some cases four children. To the casual and detached observer, such policies would appear to be designed to guarantee the continued existence of these populations amidst population restrictions. Yet to a somewhat more conspiratorially minded observer, a condition likely to be developed in situations in which one's reproductive capabilities are dictated by the state, such policies could also be interpreted as a sign that the one-child policy is a creation of and for minority nationalities, and that its harshness and violence is designed to target and eventually eliminate the Han nationality.

And this is precisely what many Han Clothing Movement participants believe. The theory that the reform era has ushered in the restoration of Manchu rule is traced back to one particular moment in 1979, when Tian Xueyuan, a purported descendant of Manchu bannermen who self-identifies (or rather “disguises himself”) as Han, was named director of the Population Research Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and thus began his work promoting family planning and population control. Tian soon became the architect of the one-child policy, or as movement participants refer to it, the “Han one-child policy,” in yet another historical fall from grace replacing what movement participants characterize as Chairman Mao's eminently reasonable family planning policy of “two is just right.”<sup>25</sup> On account of his

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<sup>25</sup> According to movement rhetoric, Mao promoted the idea that “one child is too few, two is perfect, and three is too many.” Outside of Han Clothing Movement discourses, I have yet to discover independent verification of this statement. This would appear to be yet another comforting invention of tradition in a movement structured around the idealization of lost paradises that in fact never existed.

intrinsically evil Manchu nature, Tian's intention clearly is not to control population growth, nor to balance population resources with material resources, or whatever other scientific excuses are promoted to rationalize the one-child policy, but rather to oversee the elimination of the Han nationality and the destruction of superior Han culture. Hence, alongside his publicly acknowledged role at the pinnacle of population research, he is also widely rumored amongst Han Clothing activists to have formed a secretive think tank with a group of fellow Manchus, including Ma Xu, director of the Reproductive and Genetic Center of National Research Institute for Family Planning, with the sole purpose of researching and implementing programs to complete the Qing's mission and eliminate the Han nationality once and for all. And because Manchus like Tian are also purportedly particularly skilled in the art of deception and corruption,<sup>26</sup> they have worked naturally with the "capitalists" in power in the reform era, thriving on the lack of transparency and endemic corruption and benefiting from this environment to enhance their power and work towards their goals. This lack of transparency ensured that Manchu architects of this policy were able to deceive other supposedly more benevolent leaders by claiming that there would be no problems with an aging population, labor shortages, or gender imbalance as a result of this policy. And the financial benefits of corruption further allow officials participating in the conspiracy to lavishly reward underlings who are particularly skilled at "killing Han babies," encouraging the policy's continued implementation. According to this viewpoint, the end result of this policy and its unforgiving enforcement can only be the transformation of the Han nationality, currently representing 92% of the official population, into a minority.

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<sup>26</sup> As opposed, presumably, to a more pure Han.

Like many other aspects of the Han Clothing Movement, these theories are not based in reality but rather primarily in an imaginary reaction to and reprocessing of reality. This imaginary and often overly emotional component can be seen most clearly in the example of the hyperbolic portrayal of Li Bin, former Minister of the State Population and Family Planning Commission. Although Li is listed as a member of the “Han nationality” on official websites, she is generally regarded by Han Clothing Movement participants as a clandestine Manchu, whose self-representation as “Han” only proves her Manchu nature (cf. Siegel 2006:91). And although she is officially listed as a Minister of the State Population and Family Planning Commission, she is generally regarded by movement participants as a sly and skilled “baby killer,” whose self-representation as a fairly boring bureaucratic official only proves her wild-eyed lust for baby slaughter. An example can be seen in the following image, whose text is translated below:

Translation: Manchu Tartary Family Planning Official and Child-Killing Beast Li Bin  
Specializes in Killing Han Babies

Minister of the State Family Planning and Population Commission and leader of the entire family planning enterprise Li Bin is a Manchu-Tartary descendant of Li Guoxiong, a lackey of Manchukuo who led the wolf into the house by collaborating with the Japanese Imperial Army in occupying Northeast China, wasted the human resources, material resources, and fiscal resources of the region and enslaved its people, and worked together with the invading imperial army to kill Chinese soldiers.

Li Bin loves living by a double standard, using her position of power to manufacture false population statistics in order to deceive the Chinese people and the entire world. This Manchu-Tartary baby-killing beast has in the name of “family planning” stripped the Han nationality of its equal rights to reproduction and conspired to eliminate the Han nationality so as to Tartar-ize China. She aims to overthrow China to reassert her control of all under heaven, revealing that her inhuman and rapacious designs remain as strong as ever.

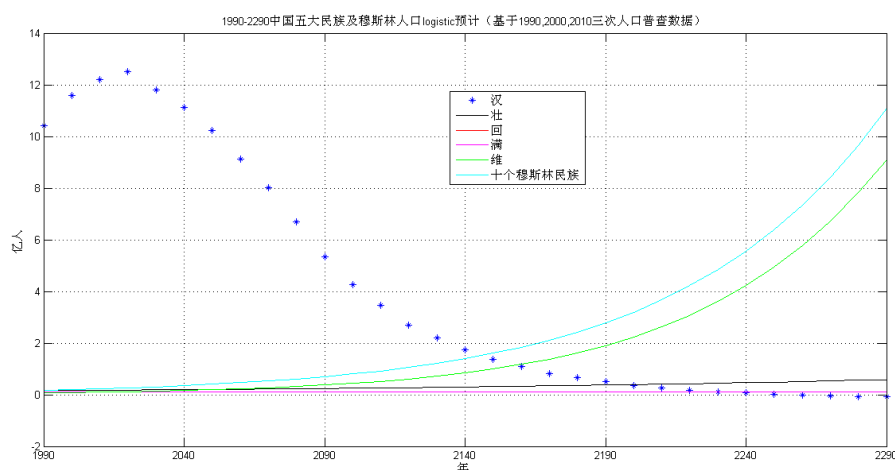


**Figure 20- A Han Clothing website's portrayal of Li Bin, "clandestine Manchu" and former Minister of the State Population and Family Planning Commission**  
(<http://bbs.hanminzu.org/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=292937&extra=page%3D1%26filter%3Dtypeid%26typeid%3D180%26typeid%3D180>)

This excerpt emphasizes the negative historical connotations surrounding the Manchu, identifying Li Bin as only the latest in a long line of supposed China-hating savages. The one-child policy is thereby removed from its reform era scientific aspirations and inserted into an alternative historical narrative of resisting the foreign invader. And although absolutely no evidence is provided to prove that Li has been personally engaged in any particularly horrific

acts besides being located at the pinnacle of a generally quite unsavory government department, this is not at all the point. After all, as is so often the case in Han Clothing imaginaries, this entire construction of “the Manchu” is not a matter of calmly and detachedly gathering evidence to reach a conclusion, but rather a matter of producing “evidence” towards a pre-determined conclusion that resonates with fellow Han nationalists’ experiences and sentiments.

Another example of this process of gathering “evidence” to reach a predetermined conclusion can be found in a less than realistic graph on a Han Clothing website tracing the population growth of the five main nationalities (i.e. Han, Zhuang, Hui, Manchu, and Uighur) along with the “ten Muslim nationalities” from 1990 to the year 2290. Draped in reassurances of scientific objectivity through the deployment of a seemingly precise graph with exact population figures and dates, the results appear to demonstrate conclusively that the Han population will dip below minority levels around 2140 and will eventually disappear by 2290, while the “Muslim”



注：由于八十年代更改民族情况较多，故未采用1982年数据。回满两族差距不大，故在图中几乎重合。出现负值是因为数值太小，matlab四舍五入造成误差，负值处基本等同于灭亡

**Figure 21- “Logistic prediction of the populations of China’s five main nationalities and Muslim nationalities, 1990-2290 (based upon data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 censuses),” illustrates the imaginary transformation of the Han (the dotted blue line) into a minority and its eventual disappearance toward a population of zero (<http://bbs.hanminzu.org/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=301522>)**

population of China will rise rapidly, in an inverse mirror image of the disappearance of the Han. No actual statistical basis or other form of explanation is provided for either the quite exaggerated drop in Han population in the near future, nor for the sudden rise in the “Muslim” population. Yet again, as was the case with the portrayal of Li Bin above, this is not a question of examining evidence and drawing a conclusion, but rather of structuring imaginary evidence around an already discovered conclusion, affirming the sentiments of both the author and the viewers of the graph.

Returning to more concrete ground, as the preceding analyses highlighted, these unreal theories are developed in response to all-too-real challenges in the real world, and give voice to the emotions and frustrations generated by these challenges. As with the examples examined in previous sections, the emotionally charged case of the one-child policy highlights the two main functions of these conspiracy theories as articulated above. First, it externalizes the issue: the one-child policy is so intrusive, monitoring and punishing the natural use of one’s own reproductive organs, that one is hard-pressed to accept the idea that this is a policy enacted by Han upon other Han. In discussions with movement activists, it is precisely such skepticism that any member of the Han could burden fellow Han with such a policy which serves as the illusorily rational kernel of these fundamentally irrational conspiracy theories: “does this seem to you like something that one nationality would do to its own people?” Faced with this policy’s fundamentally alien nature, the only seemingly rational explanation that can be found is in a similarly alien nationality pulling the strings behind the scenes, intent upon enforcing this policy upon another: the queue as an alien intrusion and imposition upon the body, and as a displaced symbol of sexuality, serves as an apt historical metaphor for the one-child policy.

Second, in addition to externalizing this fundamentally alien policy, these theories again serve to provide a complete explanation for the inexplicable, which in this case is the government's interest in one's reproductive processes. In this sense, the Manchu serves a function similar to the witch in James Siegel's analysis of "naming the witch," namely formulating an explanation for the inexplicable traumas of life, providing a seeming answer to their unanswerable questions (Siegel 2006, 102-104). Because Manchus are virtually indistinguishable from fellow Han compatriots, they can be found anywhere and everywhere that this alien power is exercised. Family planning officials' self-characterizations as Han are thus able to be interpreted as part of the conspiracy, for the Manchu's supposedly innate propensity for deception means that Han self-identification can only be a clever subterfuge to disguise one's fundamentally evil and thus fundamentally Manchu nature. The result of these two processes of externalization and explanation is then a purified Han, presented as a subaltern and fundamentally oppressed group surrounded by cruel minorities, and thereby removed from blame for a policy whose implementation is often described by Han Clothing activists as "worse than the Japanese."

This belief that forcible family planning could only be a Manchu imposition and that its implementation has been "worse than the Japanese" is revealing, in that it brings to light the commonly assumed yet grossly under-analyzed link between political legitimacy and identity. Generally speaking, the worthiness of a particular political power is presumed to be tied to its provenance: a state power derived from one's own nation or ethnic group is presumed to be inherently good and naturally benevolent, while a power coming from the outside would be inherently cruel and naturally abusive. And although it is true that an outside power may be cruel and abusive, there is no corresponding guarantee that an internal power will be inherently kind.

This is a pleasant myth of identity that we repeatedly tell ourselves despite its being equally repeatedly disproven, and which Han Clothing Movement participants apparently go to great lengths to rationalize, diligently tracing the “foreign” sources of an all too real government that is all too unpleasant yet also all too internal. The result of these imaginings, as described in the previous section, is the fleeting resuscitation of an otherwise unreal ideal Han state. Yet despite the detailed evidence that movement enthusiasts collect to prove the exteriority of the present state and thereby redeem their ideal to come, this ideal is and still remains a myth, in that it overlooks what I interpret as the inevitably external and even colonial nature of all state power.

The fundamental and experiential externality of power, expressed by Han Clothing enthusiasts through the ethnic metaphor of “the Manchu,” can be found at political power’s very origins. Marshall Sahlins’ analysis of the “stranger king” phenomenon examines a wide array of political origin narratives ranging from Cambodia to Hawaii, finding a certain structural similarity amidst the immense variety of content across communities: the rulers described in these narratives are invariably “strangers to the places and people they rule,” or in contemporary parlance, foreigners (Sahlins 2008:178) who, through the exercise of power and thus violence, are able to bring “order, justice, security, and prosperity” to the native population (Sahlins 2008:183). Tracing the origins of these origin narratives, Sahlins’ analysis links this widespread notion of stranger kings to the existential condition of human beings’ unavoidable reliance upon “life from without” (Sahlins 2008:179). Drawing upon Claude Levi-Strauss’ analysis in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, which concludes that the incest taboo and its requirement that one marry out of one’s family and thus “exchange” with others forms the basis of culture (Lévi-Strauss 1969), Sahlins similarly argues that the elementary form of political life relies upon the same logic of “dependence on external sources of existence” (Sahlins 2008:196) and “union with



the other” (Sahlins 2008:184) in the form of a polity. As expressed in these founding narratives of stranger-kingship, state power is at its very source external.

The most fascinating aspect of Sahlins’ analysis in this case is that it reminds us of a fact about politics which we would all like to forget or deny. Considering that Sahlins’ analysis of the elementary structures of politics is derived from Levi-Strauss’ analysis of kinship, the closing section of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* is revealing for thinking through the existential relation to this condition

To this very day, mankind has always dreamed of seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing. At either end of the earth and at both extremes of time, the Sumerian myth of the golden age and the Andaman myth of the future life correspond, the former placing the end of primitive happiness at a time when the confusion of language made words into common property, the latter describing the bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e., removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might *keep to oneself* (Levi-Strauss 1969:496-497, also cited in Sangren 2000:186).

At the conclusion of his description of exchange as the basis of culture and society, Levi-Strauss here presents an alternative vision of a world in which these laws might be evaded, which remains in perpetuity a dream. And similarly, throughout the global and pan-historical experience of power as fundamentally external, there has remained an alternative yet unrealized vision of a world in which a truly native or local power, a power “all one’s own,” might be exercised and embraced. In the case currently under consideration, only one of many throughout history, the Sumerian myth of the golden age can be easily replaced with the pre-modern unity of heaven and man, and the Andaman myth of the future life can be similarly replaced with the

movement's dream of a pure Han state, each promoting a potential alternative reality from the inescapable shortcomings of the present.

This evasive dream cannot be realized because it is premised upon a deceptive vision of group identity that overlooks the distinction between rulers and ruled. Taken to its logical conclusion, it can only lead to fascism, the sole political system realizing the seeming unity of people, leader, and nation in a "noncontingent undivided form of identity" (Berezin 1997:26). Yet this dream is kept alive through the reincarnation of the stranger king as accusation in the present, so as to forget the stranger king as origin narrative revealing the perpetual externality of state power. Beyond the Han Clothing Movement's externalization of state power, other popular narratives in contemporary China have posited that the world and thus China are run by "the Rothschilds" (Song 2009), "the Freemasons" (He 2010) and even, curiously, Japan and the United States; similar accusations from a dogmatic French philosopher have, in typically hyperbolic fashion, labeled Nicholas Sarkozy's politics as "transcendental Petainism," equally curiously accusing the former French President of collaboration with "the Yankee model" (Badiou 2008:3, 16), rendered for full dramatic (or in Badiou's terminology, "militant") effect in the metaphor of a no longer present Nazi invader; and perhaps most curiously, although these national conspiracies all too often envision the United States as the conspirator behind the scenes clandestinely running the world, many similar although inverted conspiracy theories have emerged in recent years in the United States itself, imagining current President Barack (Hussein!) Obama variously as a "Muslim" and/ or "foreigner" beholden to presumably colonizing and "Kenyan" values (in the paranoid words of Newt Gingrich), while also being beholden to an

“anti-colonial worldview” (in the words of Newt Gingrich, from the same sentence).<sup>27</sup> The confused combination of “anti-colonialism” and presumed “foreign” colonization in Gingrich’s muddled thoughts is in fact symptomatic of a general trend within these examples of the contemporary stranger-king as accusation: the inability to completely deny and repress the fundamental exteriority of state power through the perpetual myth of “native” power which is inevitably experienced as anything but native.

This tension within experience then leads to the unending paranoid search for leaders behind the curtains who are not “our type,” so as to reaffirm the purity of “our type” (i.e. reaffirming identity) in the face of the challenges and disappointments of reality. The academic discourse of postcolonialism, far too often manifested as a witch-hunt with more sophisticated theoretical vocabulary, is fully complicit in this fantasy of identity, overlooking the fact that state power is fundamentally colonial, regardless of whether the ruling regime is overtly “colonial” in the conventional sense, or post-colonial, or neither. Allen Chun has made a related (although admittedly not quite as polemical) point in his recent paper “Toward a Postcolonial Critique of the State in Singapore,” in which he pushes postcolonial theory beyond its often simplistic affirmation of “subaltern” identity toward a framework for analyzing institutions in general (Chun 2012). Chun insightfully observes that the “poverty of the postcolonial” is to be found precisely in its most vulgar (and arguably most common) sense: as an affirmative statement of identity alone (Chun 2012: 679). Influenced by Said’s myopic interpretation of Orientalism as existing solely upon one axis, namely the East-West binary (cf. Baumann, et al. 2004), the vigilant academic hunt for “Orientalism” and “colonialism” serves only to reproduce

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Costa, “Gingrich: Obama’s Kenyan, Anti-Colonial Worldview,” *National Review*, September 11, 2010 <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/246302/gingrich-obama-s-kenyan-anti-colonial-worldview-robert-costa>

autopoeitically and reinforce the imaginary East-West difference that serves as its founding distinction, transferring from one side of the binary to the other the simplistic portrayals which it claims to wholeheartedly oppose. Within this rhetorical circuit, immunized against critique by its self-congratulatory moralizing claims, orthodox post-colonialism serves as a theoretically elaborate celebration of simplistic identity which can be tied all too easily to the narrow-minded elation of nationalism.

A potential solution to this conundrum, however, might be found in Chun's suggestion that postcolonial theory's application should not be limited solely to overtly colonial/ post-colonial societies, but could rather "be regarded as a critical framework for any theory or institution" which "rel[ies] on similar genres of cultural representation, discursive authority, identity formations and knowledge functions" (Chun 2012: 677) toward practices of "unacceptable, intolerable, and insupportable domination" (Chun 2012: 685). Chun proceeds to demonstrate such an expansion and reapplication of postcolonial theory through an analysis of the superficially non-colonial yet culturally and politically stifling state of Singapore.

A similar line of analysis might be proposed for interpreting the one-child policy. For in the grand scheme of human history, what better example of colonization might we find than a state's intrusion into and close monitoring of the reproductive capabilities of its populace? In the handbook of traditional anti-colonial analysis, *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that the divisions of "West" and "East," or "us" and "them," "are generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends" (Said 1979:45). Yet the resulting overemphasis upon the distinction of "West" and "East" in Said and his followers' analyses primarily serves to

affirm and reproduce an equally rigid and stifling identity,<sup>28</sup> while failing to subject to critique far more socially relevant distinctions, such as ruler and ruled: a distinction also employed “usually towards not especially admirable ends,” particularly when it can be automatically legitimized through the binding force of collective identity in relation to the overriding binary of “insiders” and “outsiders.”

The nation as a fantasy-driven affective system contributes greatly to these complications in relation to political power, insofar as the always external state serves, on the one hand, as the sole enactor of the grandiose fantasies of the nation on a massive scale, as well as, on the other hand, as a primary enactor of injustices and catastrophes on an equally grand scale, a fact which the moments of grandiose fantasies are not always able to cover. This same political entity that produces fleeting moments of pride through its exercise of power can also produce considerably more durable moments of confusion, discomfort, anger, and dismay through its exercise of power: arbitrary decision-making and controls, censorship, forcible family planning, and various other limits upon oneself realized through the state’s exercise of political power are but a few examples. For if Orientalism “is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, judgment, discipline, or governing” (Said 1979: 41), then the first and last Orientalists have been none other than “Oriental” rulers, whose simultaneous distinction from and illusory unity with the ruled illusorily “justifies in advance” their actions. The one-child policy that Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts struggle to comprehend similarly relies upon the collection of data, and the placement of a subject under scrutiny, judgment, discipline, and governing towards the rationalization of “unacceptable, intolerable, and

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<sup>28</sup> Gerd Bauman and Andre Gingrich’s *Grammars of Identity/Alterity* (2004) insightfully expands Said’s approach beyond the East-West binary into three grammars: orientalizing, segmentation, and encompassment. The result is a considerably more nuanced structural vision of identity as a process not burdened by geographical locations.

insupportable domination” (cf. Chun 2012: 685). Thus, to frame the question of political power in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders” is a predictably simplistic affirmation of collective identity that completely ignores actual social dynamics, thereby illusorily rationalizing situations internal to “the East” or “China” wherein a state apparatus is able to monitor and control intimate reproductive processes while being celebrated as the liberator and sole line of defense against supposedly predatory “foreign invaders.” It is then no surprise that the founding distinction of identity which rationalizes this behavior in the first place as “internal affairs” must then be reaffirmed through the externalization of the actions that it falsely rationalizes, as can be seen in the critique of critique as invariably “Orientalist,” as well as in the comparable theory of the Manchu as the modern “stranger king.”

The Manchu is thus portrayed as the sole source of the depredations of history in Han Clothing Movement narratives, so as to externalize the violence and despotism at the core of the modern Chinese state and provide a basis in the popular imagination for what might be called a positive conspiracy theory: the belief that all that is done by fellow countrymen is in the best interests of the country, and that there are “good people” within the bureaucracy who will make everything “right.” So long as the externalizing images of these foreign invaders continue to play a central role in the construction of Chinese and Han identity, explaining away the challenges of history, the native stranger king will continue to have relatively free reign. Reflecting the politically futile nature of this essentially imaginary politics, the next section examines a case in which a group of Han Clothing activists self-organized to confront once and for all their Manchu enemy.

#### IV. Confronting the Manchu

One Friday evening in the fall of 2010, I received a text message from a friend in the local Han Clothing organization, telling me to meet him and a few other Han Clothing enthusiasts at 8:00am the next morning on the edge of town. He would not respond to my inquiries about what would happen the next day, but assured me that I had to see it for myself. When I emerged from the metro station and found my companions, I noted immediately that everyone appeared to be in particularly high spirits. Finally breaking their silence to tell me the plan for the day, I was ever so briefly surprised: we were planning to confront a Manchu lackey that day and convert him to the cause of Han Clothing.

I soon learned that a local designer had developed an exhibition in his gallery featuring ancient Chinese clothes. Archaeologically speaking, because the Qing Dynasty is historically the closest dynasty and thus the most likely to have clothing remnants to display, and politically speaking, because official narratives dogmatically emphasize the completely unproblematic “Chineseness” of the Qing Dynasty, it should not have been a surprise that all of the outfits featured in this exhibition were from the Qing era. It is also, however, not a surprise that these outfits were viewed as foreign “Manchu clothing” in the eyes of Han Clothing activists, and thus as a sign of creeping Manchu hegemony. Encouraged by a leading figure in the local Han Clothing Movement who had encountered this exhibition in a professional setting, two members of the local association had clandestinely visited the gallery over the past week, staking out the situation. Their conclusion was unanimous: “he is promoting Manfu (Manchurian clothing), and fighting Hanfu (Han Clothing).” We seemed to have tracked down one cog in the expansive Manchu machinery of Han oppression, and were about to confront him: perhaps in hopes of catching him slightly off guard, a meeting had been arranged for 9:00am on a Saturday morning.

Prior to our arrival at the studio, participants had envisioned a burly, wicked Manchu behind the scenes of the exhibition, determined to slander the Han nationality through the promotion of Manchu clothing towards his final goal of Han extermination. In contrast to this image of the evil other, participants agreed to emphasize a “civilized” approach that would show their difference from such savagery, “speaking some reason” (讲道理) in hopes that this curator might change his ways, and recognize the one and only true path for China: Han Clothing. Toward this goal, I was informed that only the better educated and more understanding members of the local Han Clothing association were notified of this event, in order to ensure that the argument would be presented clearly and reasonably. Although everyone in the movement promoted the Han ideal, some participants were “no good” (不行) for this type of activity. As for myself, in addition to serving as a witness to this epic showdown, I was clearly also invited to serve as symbolic “international support” to provide additional legitimacy to the group as well as their argument.

Upon arriving at the studio, the Manchu whom we were to meet seemed to be immediately engaged in his deceptive ways. His assistant told us that he had not yet arrived for our 9:00am discussion on a Saturday morning, an understandable tardiness that could nevertheless be interpreted in a sinister manner by right of his imaginary Manchu nature. As we wandered through the exhibition, glancing at a quite expansive collection of Qing Dynasty textiles and modern reproductions, movement participants became convinced that our host was insincere in his agreement to meet and was stalling for time. The conspiracy theories grew with each minute that the meeting was delayed, until everyone was convinced that he was already in his studio, and was planning something. These paranoid theories continued to unfold at an



unbelievably rapid pace until the moment that our host arrived, at which point they promptly ground to a halt. For rather than facing down a scheming Manchu, we instead stood face to face with a noticeably hung-over and somewhat flamboyant Cantonese speaking clothes designer who was certainly not looking for a fight on an early Saturday morning.

The meeting, conducted in a sunny corner of the curator's expansive studio, began with each Han Clothing advocate making a short speech. No matter whether Han Clothing really has five millennia of history or is an invented tradition, the movement itself, over the past decade, has developed a quite "traditional" way of presenting Han Clothing, which was repeated once again that morning. The outlines of this portrayal should already be quite predictable for readers: the Han and their clothing have existed for five millennia, since the time of the Yellow Emperor. Han Clothing was erased by the barbaric Qing. The outfit of the Tang is not from the Tang, and *magua* and *qipao* are not Chinese clothing. Suddenly, our designer leaned forward and politely interrupted this monologue with a few words that no one was expecting: "I just want to say that I absolutely detest the brutality of the Qing government and completely support Han Clothing."

Our dreaded Manchu opponent had likely conducted some close research on the movement before our meeting, as he was even more adamant in his outrage against "the Manchus" than many Han Clothing activists. Less than twenty minutes into our conversations, we found ourselves collectively reflecting upon the cruelty of the well-known Qing massacres in Yangzhou and Jiading: with the newly added historical detail that the true origins of these massacres was the determination to erase Han Clothing and thereby destroy the Han spirit. Our former enemy nodded eagerly in agreement, "it's horrible." And thus, an activist interjected,

once Han Clothing is revitalized, the Han's spirit will be brought back to life. Our former enemy could not have agreed more strongly, "I would be happy to work with you on that."

We remained in this designer's studio until later in the afternoon, missing lunch because we were so absorbed in the discussion of ancient clothing, debating the role of hats in pre-modern society, and awkwardly perusing an unusually large collection of classical erotic images that our former Manchu opponent had collected over the years and was all too eager to share with us. Before we knew it, we were all the best of friends, and this once clandestine cog in the Manchu machine of oppression eagerly agreed to work with the local Han Clothing association to produce a promotional film to be released before the Chinese New Year. Everyone agreed that far too few people knew about Han Clothing, and that it was necessary to expose more fellow Han to their national clothing, so that they might recognize its full beauty and glory. And most importantly, everyone agreed that they could work together toward this goal.

From this case of mistaken opposition, a new alliance had been built and an opportunity had been created to promote Han Clothing more widely. These should not have been disappointing results. But as we sat down for a very late lunch, the atmosphere amongst participants was considerably more subdued than the excitement of confrontation that I had encountered earlier in the morning. Reflecting upon our lengthy meeting, one advocate observed that Han Clothing enthusiasts often have good intentions but also far too often make the mistake of opposition (対立) in dealing with others. Rather than a mistake, however, this opposition is in my analysis central to the movement and its affirmation of identity, particularly in light of the notably subdued atmosphere at that late afternoon lunch. For when one has an enemy whom one can oppose and who can serve as an explanation of and an excuse for the world as it is, all seems

clear and certain. This group had eagerly organized to face the feared Manchu: the supposed source of all that is wrong in contemporary China. But then, all of the sudden, the all-encompassing theory of the Manchu cabal which reinforces Han identity encountered a real-world exception which could not be explained within its framework, and everything seemed considerably less exciting. Over lunch that afternoon, there were already bureaucratic arguments about how to proceed with the promotional video and who would be responsible for various related tasks. By the time that the Chinese New Year arrived, the video was not produced: disorganization, debate, and disagreement amongst local Han Clothing activists eventually led to the total collapse of this unexpected agreement which clearly provided an opportunity but also complicated worldviews.

Early in my research, a scholar once asked whether my work with Han Clothing enthusiasts was intended to study the “power of civil society,” a misinterpretation which nevertheless provided new directions for analyzing the issues at hand. Indeed, considering for the sake of analysis the movement’s place within a potential civil society, we might note that Han Clothing is arguably one of the largest officially tolerated nationwide social movements in reform-era China. Yet if the conspiracy theories reviewed in this chapter are indeed the direction in which civil society is proceeding, this could only be cause for pessimism. Conspiracy theories such as those peddled by Han Clothing activists are not in any sense exceptional: quite similar examples can be seen in Song Qiang, Zhang Xiaobo et al’s *China Can Say No* and *Unhappy China* (Song, et al. 2009; Song, et al. 1996), wherein “them” equals the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Song Hongbing’s bestselling *Currency War* series (Song 2009), wherein “them” equals the Rothschilds, He Xin’s latest eccentric work *Who Runs the World?* (He 2010), wherein “them” equals the Freemasons, Larry Lang Xianping’s nationalist-pessimistic critique of the

state of the Chinese economy (Lang 2010), wherein them equals “foreigners” manipulating the economy, or the reflections of such New Leftists as Kong Qingdong and Sima Nan, which combine pseudo-Marxist rhetoric with nationalist-fascist paranoia to condemn the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and of course, most obsessively, their traitorous “running dogs” within China (Zeng 2012). Such conspiracy theories have proliferated rapidly throughout Chinese society over the past decade and a half, and the reliable structural similarity amongst these mutually conflicting examples indicates a powerful source of appeal.

Each of these modes of description comfortingly provides a framework to understand and interpret the world through the distinction between us and them, removing “us” from responsibility for the present while placing all of the blame upon “them,” namely those who run the world and are thus solely responsible for its shortcomings. By opposition, “we” emerge unscathed as victims in the present and potential saviors for the future, at which point “China” will variously “say no,” become happy, resist the Rothschilds and the Freemasons, realize economic independence, finally root out the traitors, or of course establish a truly “Han” and thus truly “Chinese” form of governance. These theories are richly therapeutic for their believers (Harding and Stewart 2003), allowing subjects to deny that the current state of society and politics is something that “we” as Han or as Chinese have done to “ourselves.” Yet for all of their emotional redemption, these ideas remain in the end thoroughly impoverished frameworks for interpretation and action, mystifying the very real challenges of the world and re-presenting them through a seemingly all-encompassing and empowering but fundamentally delusional and thus disempowering narrative. Much like the self-reproducing paradox of the fantasy of the nation, these conspiracy theories serve at once as symptoms of sociopolitical dilemmas and as fleeting sources of therapy. Yet in the end, the real source of the perpetuation of injustices is

precisely the identificatory investment in the idea of “the Han” and “China” which these conspiracy theories rationalize and thus perpetuate, thereby ensuring one point of consistency in an always rapidly changing and uncertain world: the continued appeal of both identity and conspiracy, each sustaining the other.

## Chapter 7

### Producing Purity: Reimagining the Traditional Woman

The Han Clothing Movement, as the preceding chapters have demonstrated, is a collection of individuals seeking the realization of a transcendent and always elusive ideal of identity embodied in the idea of the Han. Yet this idea, although envisioned as a timeless and unified identity, is nevertheless founded upon an essential division: the division of gender. Amidst Han Clothing's unity as "Han," clear gender distinctions are made such that there are particular types of Han Clothing for men, and other types for women: men wear *shenyi* (深衣), *zhiduo* (直裰), or *xuanduan* (玄端), while women wear *ruqun* (襦裙), *aoqun* (襖裙), and *da'ao* (大襖). Even Han Clothing styles that both male and female devotees can wear, such as the *zhiju* (直裾) or *quju* (曲裾), are clearly distinguished in terms of color and designs, with darker and more solemn colors for men, along with brighter and more floral designs for women. And for those who might miss these clues, stores clearly divide clothing styles as either "male Han Clothing" (男裝) or "female Han Clothing" (女裝).

In a movement that places such an emphasis upon the unity of Han Clothing and thus the unity of the Han, the notable emphasis upon this distinction between male and female belies a particular focus among participants upon the issue of gender relations. In many movement participants' views, the "proper" division of the sexes as practiced in tradition is essential to the realization of a proper and unified Han-ness in the present. In this process, a backward-looking and essentially misogynist view of gender is given a veneer of false legitimacy through the notion of "tradition" and the possessive will of nationalism. The resulting limiting vision of femininity clearly has appeal to male participants, insofar as it imagines submissive and loyal

women who “belong” to Han men purely by right of their being born in China. Yet this smothering vision of womanhood is also in many cases embraced by women participants who, in casting themselves in the role of the “traditional woman,” sacrifice freedom of choice for national-traditionalist cultural capital.

In the following analyses, I first review the ways in which “culture” and “nation,” two of the core concepts of the Han Clothing Movement, produce a highly restrictive and regressive vision of gender relations. I then proceed to demonstrate these trends in action at a so-called Ladies’ Academy in contemporary urban China affiliated with the Han Clothing Movement. Finally, in light of the preceding analyses, I discuss the limiting and normative nature of the Han Clothing Movement as a whole, in contrast to its unrealized potential, as a self-organized group, to promote a novel openness in contemporary China.

### I. Men of Action, Women of Restraint



**Figure 22- Typical portrayals of male and female subjectivity through Han Clothing**  
(Received via email, May 2011)

The illustrations above, featuring men in the first and women in the second, succinctly capture the ideal images of male and female nature within Han Clothing imaginaries. Various

commonalities in overall design are apparent across the two images, denoting their common Han-ness. Yet upon closer inspection, one is able to see that the male styles feature slightly darker colors, while the female styles lean towards notably brighter hues and far more elaborate headdresses. The bodily comportments of the figures in each image are also revealing. In the men's images, the figure stands in a determined and assertive pose, with his arms either on his hips as if to face down a rival, or extending outwards as if to claim his space in the world or guide a viewer forward. By contrast, the women's poses are considerably more uniform and restrained, demonstrating a certain demure bearing in contrast to the portrayal of their male counterparts. Furthermore, in a few examples from the images, the man bears a sword, arrows, or other similarly intimidating implements, demonstrating his aggressive posture within the world. By contrast, the female figures possess no such tools, and keep their hands folded in front of their chests, and even hidden within their sleeves. Revealingly, male and female movement participants often engage in similar stereotypical poses for photographs when donning Han Clothing in real life: men take on a serious and even at times confrontational pose, while women tend to take on the type of demure and restrained look featured in these images. The image presented therein is a clearly differentiated "traditional" vision of men of action, and women of restraint.

Activists have repeatedly insisted that Han Clothing is primarily an external medium for representing deeper and more fundamental matters of culture, tradition, and Chineseness. Now, the same is true for gender relations. Just as Han Clothing expresses a constructed vision of glory as an internal Han essence, these divisions in clothing and accompanying poses represent the socially constructed gender distinctions at the core of Han-ness as a natural and eternal division (cf. Bourdieu 2001:23). In the case of men, these portrayals reflect a complex combination of



valiant heroism and superior civilization that is nothing short of spectacular. In the case of women, these portrayals embody a reserved and docile nature frequently rendered in one stock phrase from movement discourse: “beauty that emanates outward from within (由内往外的美),” suggesting a natural internal feminine “beauty” characterized by internal restraint and coyness that is further reflected on the outside. Thus, just as Han Clothing reflects the intrinsic Han-ness of the Han, so these distinctions in clothing and bearing between male and female Han are assumed to reflect intrinsic differences between the two sexes.

Nevertheless, as this Han essence has purportedly been lost in the modern era, so this supposedly natural distinction between the sexes has been lost as well. The crisis of modern Han-ness is intertwined in movement imaginings with a perceived crisis of modern Han women, who are considered essential to the continuation of tradition, yet who are considered to be actively involved in tradition’s abandonment. Discussions with male Han Clothing enthusiasts over the course of my research reliably characterized contemporary Han women in the age of reform and opening as far too “open” (cf. Farrer 2002). As mentioned in the monologue recounted in Chapter 3 contrasting China’s past and present, women were accused of dressing improperly, with “private” parts of their bodies hanging out for all to see, like “Westerners.” This forwardness in dress naturally represented deeper issues, such as a corresponding forwardness in domestic affairs and material concerns which participants viewed as incompatible with proper womanhood: modern women were characterized as too “overpowering (強勢),” betraying standard gender roles, and solely concerned with such material matters as apartments, cars, and luxury items, thereby forgetting their “traditional values.” This forwardness in domestic affairs further corresponded to an inelegant forwardness in sexual matters: one movement participant, a self-declared virgin in his late twenties, displayed a determined virginity complex (cf. Farrer

2002:240-242) and repeatedly bemoaned the lack of “pure” women in contemporary urban culture. Another movement participant, after a few drinks, would inevitably begin enquiring about my own sexual experiences like an investigator at a crime scene, failing to hide his anger as he asked precisely how many of “our Chinese women (我們中國姑娘)” I had known during my time in China. My discussions with male Han Clothing enthusiasts thus suggested that the ideal image of Han femininity captured in the images above was long gone, and had been replaced by inelegant, unreserved, coarse, and generally immoral modern women who were neither “true Han” nor even “true women.”

Reflecting this viewpoint, in the winter of 2011, I had dinner at the home of Tang, a single man with a fairly successful career who viewed himself as a “true Han” and thus a real man: similar to Bourdieu’s observation of the equivalence between “manliness” and “Kabylness” (*thakbaylith*) (cf. Bourdieu 2001:48), both “true Han” and “good man” are rendered in Chinese as a *haohan* (好漢), or “good Han.” The only area in which Tang considered himself a failure was in relations between the sexes. Yet he was predictably adamant that this failure was not his fault, but rather the fault of today’s women. Tang told me, in an inversion of the ideal of beauty emanating outwards from this inside that modern women “try to make themselves beautiful on the outside, to cover up what’s inside.” Opening his laptop, he showed me a series of images of the “modern” women. In these images, a woman was first shown on the left in a fairly unflattering picture, and then again on the right, in a considerably more flattering portrayal. Two examples are featured below:



**Figure 23- Imaginary comparisons before and after make-up (<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-293-100926-1.shtml>)**

These photographs, one example of a popular and often copied framework in Chinese online forums, purportedly compare and contrast two images of the same women: the first, on the left, *au naturel*, and second, on the right, with make-up. Certain inconsistencies within the photos, such as the shape of the individuals' faces, a trait that cannot be changed easily with cosmetics,

suggest that these are not in fact images of the same people, but rather images comparing two different people who are made up and dressed to look vaguely similar. Again, carefully prepared and edited photographs are presumed to reveal a fundamental truth.

However, as is the case with many matters within the Han Clothing Movement, the real question is not the veracity of these images, but rather the source of their appeal and resonance with certain male viewers. These images, which viewers presumed to unlock a deeper truth, were thus in fact more revealing of their viewers than of those whom they claimed to portray: such viewers were able to overlook the inconsistencies within these images because they present a conclusion that has already been reached. They lay bare, in yet another example of conspiracy, a suspected dirty secret: the idea of women as double agents, using a false exterior beauty to entice men and cover over a deeper ugliness. For at the same time that these male viewers desire the women pictured as potential objects, they also, as spurned potential suitors, appear to hate these same women for the rejections that they experience in daily life. The most comforting outcome of this ambivalence is the self-affirming conclusion that the beauty that both lured and rejected oneself is fundamentally false, or an illusion. In contrast to the traditional ideal of a “beauty that emanates outward from within (由内往外的美)” promoted by movement participants and Tang himself, these images revealed a suspected outward beauty that covers over a perceived internal decay in the modern woman.

Yet much as the widely bemoaned realities of the present were not representative of the real China, which could only be found in the past, so the reality of the true Chinese woman, according to Tang, could be rediscovered in the traditional woman, who embodied this unity of internal and external beauty. The “real” Chinese women of the past, in Tang’s analysis, had no need for cosmetics: their beauty had an internal foundation which emanated outwards for all to

see. Tang claimed that the essential component of this internal beauty was a commitment to the three obediences (三從). First articulated in the classic “Etiquette and Ceremonials” (儀禮), the three obediences indicate that early in her life, a woman will obey her father; later in life, she will obey her husband; and finally in widowhood, she will obey her son. Tang’s explanation of the notion of 從, generally translated as “obedience,” rendered this concept as obedience (服從), reliance (依靠), and focus (寄托). In his view, obedience was a characteristic of thoughts and actions, with a woman following the guidance of a series of leading men in the course of her life. Reliance was an economic matter, in so far as the traditional woman would always have a central male figure to rely upon for the resources that she needed throughout the course of her life. And focus was a spiritual matter, a matter of dedication to a particular man and his family. The benefit of this internal obedience, reliance, and focus, according to Tang, was that women would show beauty from the inside out, which could be appreciated by the various men throughout her life. And in turn, she would be guaranteed security and stability for her entire life, extending from birth as a child in relation to a father through death in relation to their own child, a son: a happiness unknown by what he referred to as today’s “so called equal, so called democratic,”<sup>29</sup> so called independent, and so called strong women.”

There remained hope for revitalization of this ideal image, in Tang’s opinion, through a return to what he called “traditional” ways and values (cf. Afary 1997). Another evening, Tang shared with me a new Chinese-language website that had generated a substantial amount of discussion on Han Clothing forums: the Rare Treasure of Chastity website (雅品貞操網),<sup>30</sup> a site

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<sup>29</sup> Denunciations of the downfall of the “modern woman” were often mixed in with allegations that this downfall was tied to “the West” and its “Western” idea of democracy. These revealing associations will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> The site was formerly located at the address [www.ypzc.net](http://www.ypzc.net), but has been closed since early 2012.

dedicated to promoting chastity amongst the next generation of Chinese youth. The site was founded by Tu Shiyou (涂世友), a 38-year-old woman from Hubei Province who claimed to have saved her virginity for marriage. Tu's reserve with regards to matters of sexual exploration, however, stood in stark contrast to her unreserved self-promotion: publicizing online the results of a hymen inspection conducted at Wuhan's Tongji Hospital as her official "virgin certification," she openly called herself a "Chastity Goddess (贞操女神)," and tasked herself with nothing less than saving the next generation from the dangers of sexuality. She was thus essentially a female version of Chen Zhanbing, with the sole difference that her focus was sexual conservatism rather than sartorial conservatism. As a result of her outlandish self-portrayal, the response to Tu's efforts in broader society had largely been one of outright mockery. Yet her articulation of such traditional values had caught the attention of the Han Clothing Movement and my acquaintance Tang. This Tu Shiyou, he told me, is a real Chinese woman, recapturing the longstanding and outstanding moral tradition of the Chinese people that needed to be recaptured amidst the uncertainties, instability, and immorality of society today. This, he told me, is real beauty.

The gap between imagining and experience developed in the analyses thus far is clearly also relevant in Tang's case: while some men in Western countries imagine an "obedient" "Oriental" and thus "feminine" woman as a solution to their own failed relationships and sexual insecurities, others in this "Orient" are similarly imagining a vision of the "traditional" woman as a response to their failed experiences in the present. Constructed around moralizing requirements of obedience, chastity, and reliance that do not extend to their male counterparts, this vision of the "real Chinese woman" is less a practical framework for behavior in contemporary life than a misogynistic fantasy. Revealingly, in these constructions, no one is more certain about the

characteristics of a “real” woman than men, such that the narcissistic reconstruction and objectification of the self towards one’s ideal image in movement participation develops alongside a corresponding misogynistic reconstruction of “women” towards one’s ideal image as objects capable of control and indeed possession.

Furthermore, as is often the case in the Han Clothing Movement, this retrogressive fantasy is articulated through the metaphors of “culture” and “tradition,” providing an exterior (or even, one might say, cosmetic) appearance of innateness and righteousness which is otherwise clearly lacking (cf. Afary 1997), appropriating culture as a conservative defense against what should be universal values (Yuan 2012). If beauty in the past emanated from the inside out, and if cosmetics serve as an external disguise for the internal decay of the modern woman, the notion of traditional culture as deployed in these Han Clothing Movement narratives of femininity is then the forceful insertion of an externally defined and highly limiting vision of traditional beauty into the interior of contemporary individuals as their proper essence, towards which they must develop. Just as much as the idea of culture is a collection of ideas and practices, it is also an idea in and of itself circulating within the cultural world and fully capable of being used and even abused: as a fantasy, or as an illusorily self-legitimizing edict, or, in this case, as both, constructing a misogynistic fantasy of womanhood as the natural state of gender relations from time immemorial which must be recaptured.

Richard Handler’s analyses of nationalism as “possessive individualism” (Handler, 50) are relevant to this point, insofar as in addition to “having” a nation and “having” a culture (as well as in turn being possessed by the idea of that nation and culture), a male nationalist further envisions himself as possessing a certain natural right over the women within his territory as

enactors and reproducers of his fantasy of national culture. The source and the repercussions of this dominant possession are examined in more depth in the next section.

## II. The Nationalist Traffic in Women

Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity.

-Erich Fromm (1955:58)

During my research with the Han Clothing Movement in Guangzhou, a particularly belligerent post from a movement participant whom I had met a few times at activities began circulating on Han Clothing sites. Entitled “Single Men<sup>31</sup> of China Unite, Stop Foreigners and Black People from Stealing Chinese Women!”, the article attempts to explain many Chinese men’s admittedly difficult single status through the cunning of “foreigners” and the corruption of Chinese women. At the same time, beyond analysis, the author further proposes some fairly disturbing “solutions” to these issues. The article begins:

November 11<sup>th</sup> is Single’s Day (光棍節). Getting down to the bottom of it, the primary reason that many of us are single is that there are more men than women here in China. And why is this so? The main reason is that family planning has produced a gender imbalance in our country. But there is also another reason: because foreigners (洋人) and black people (黑人) are stealing China’s female resources (中國的女性資源) in large numbers.<sup>32</sup>

We might pause for a moment to note that women are characterized here not as human beings, which would include the character for “people (人),” but rather as “resources (資源),” a term

<sup>31</sup> “Single men” here is literally “bare branches” (*guanggun*), a psychosexually suggestive term used commonly in Chinese popular culture to refer to single males.

<sup>32</sup> “中國光棍團結起來，別讓洋人，黑人搶中國女人！ [Single Men of China Unite, Stop Foreigners and Black People from Stealing Chinese Women!]" <http://bbs.hanminzu.org/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=293030&extra=page%3D3>



generally reserved for natural resources possessed by a nation, such as oil, coal, forests, or water. This terminology suggests that in the author's view, women are items to be possessed, and presumably not shared.

From an anthropological perspective, the notion of women as "resources" is reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss's thesis in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the origins of culture itself can be traced back to the "exchange" of women (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Lévi-Strauss argues that the exchange of women through exogamy forms peaceful alliances between men which serve, like communication between people, as the foundation of culture. However, just as the world appears to be naturally divided into languages which construct mutually unintelligible communities of communication in the romanticized ideal of the mother tongue (cf. Sakai 2005), this article's author similarly presumes that the world is divided into national communities which demarcate the natural limits of exogamy. Thus, while exchange would serve as the foundation of culture as a universal, the limit upon the exchange of such national "resources" beyond national-cum-racial borders would serve as the foundation for singular national cultures; and although Lévi-Strauss found similarities between the exchange of wives and the exchange of words, women in this framework are to be treated as "state secrets," to be kept within the confines of the nation state for reasons that do not require further explanation or justification. Comparable to similar operations throughout the Han Clothing Movement, the personal anxieties surrounding the author's own sexual desires and sense of self are sublimated into and justified through far more lofty concerns relating to the existence of the Chinese nation and Chinese culture as a whole.

Providing evidence of the importance of these "resources," and by extension the significance of the author's concerns beyond his own sexual frustrations, the article claims:

In Latin America, the majority of citizens are of mixed Indian-European<sup>33</sup> descent. How did all of this mixing happen? Theoretically, there are two possibilities: a white man and an Indian woman could have children, or an Indian man and a white woman could have children. But only one of these possibilities actually happened in reality: all of the current residents of Latin America are descendants of mating between white men and Indian women. There are almost no cases at all of descent from the pairing of white women and Indian men. As a result, the Y chromosome of the Indian race is about to disappear from this earth! Why? Because white women look upon Indian men as inferior monkeys, and are completely unwilling to get in bed with them! But did you know? The Indians are brothers of us yellow people! And they are about to be made extinct by the white people! Even if the X chromosome passed on by Indian women is able to continue to exist in this world, their genetics have already been completely changed by those white people! Now, if we Chinese are not able to be revitalized, today's situation for the Indian nationality is tomorrow's fate for the Chinese nationality! The Y chromosome of our Chinese nationality will be erased from this earth by white people!

The “resourceful” essence of women is articulated here at once in the bluntest of terms, with clearly defined gender roles required in order to ensure the survival of the nation (cf. Moon 2005), as well as in the starkest miscomprehensions of biology. In terms of the latter, unique nationalities are presumed to have unique chromosomes: a highly doubtful premise, to say the least. This is not, however, a random ill-considered idea held by one isolated individual scrawling incoherent manifestoes on the Internet. The idea that there is a biological basis for Chineseness is in fact a commonly held belief in the modern era, expressed through metaphors of blood, biological markers, and DNA. Most memorably, during a conversation with Han Clothing enthusiasts in Guangzhou about the purity of the Han nationality, a friendly acquaintance claimed that all members of the Han nationality have three unique chromosomes which have been passed down from the era of the “Three Sovereigns” (Fuxi, Nüwa, and the Farmer God) to the present, with each chromosome representing one of these mythical figures. Appealing for my confirmation of his quirky theory as an “educated” “Westerner,” I responded that I did not know

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<sup>33</sup> Although the correct terminology would be “indigenous” or “native,” for the sake of accurately reflecting the tone of the translated article, I have kept the term “Indian” as used therein (印 or 印第安). The same is true of the essay's repeated references to “black people,” wherein the English phrasing, although coarse, may even be somewhat more polite than the connotations presumed by the original author.

much about genetics. This is a true statement, despite the fact that I may know just enough to doubt his theory.

This imagined purity, embodied in the idea of eternal national DNA, relies upon the national “resource” of the woman for its perpetuation, despite the fact that, reflecting the patrilineal logic central to Chinese culture for millennia, the woman remains within this portrayal physiologically unable to contribute substantively to this purity. Continuing his discourse on the existence of DNA from the Three Sovereigns, my acquaintance asserted that, when analyzing (the predetermined conclusion of) the purity of the Han nationality, one had to admit that some “mixing” had occurred throughout the millennia, particularly because the Han as civilizers had long interacted with and come to absorb other less advanced nationalities in the process of history. But because those nationalities were inferior, he argued, such historical pairings could only be Han men marrying women of other nationalities; Han women, as members of a superior nationality, would not marry “out” to other nationalities. The revealing assumptions behind the idea that civilizational-racial dominance equals male sexual dominance were then further reflected in his assertion that “male chromosomes” are stronger than “female chromosomes,” thereby guaranteeing the purity of the Han within this imaginary arrangement. For any pollution from other nationalities’ women would be erased from the Han DNA chain within three generations, my acquaintance argued, thanks to the contributions of men and the power of their genes. Of course, this is primarily a pseudo-scientific and not entirely coherent reincarnation of the longstanding paternalistic exclusion of women from kinship in Chinese reproductive politics, rendering women as “outsiders (外)” who were once invisible on ancestral tablets and are now invisible in the composition of imaginary national DNA. Just as the end product of this theory’s previous incarnation was a pure patriline, so the end product of this elaborate yet biologically

misinformed theory is the fairly predictable and clearly desired result of Han national purity: the conclusion towards which the argument is constructed.

Returning to the excerpt above, its equally unreal imaginings of biology envision a similar role for men in reproduction. In a slight variation, the author creates the idea of “national chromosomes” to assert that the act of a male of one nationality, possessing his nationality’s XY chromosomes, reproducing with a female of another nationality, possessing only her nationality’s XX chromosomes, would thereby permanently replace the Y chromosome of the female’s nationality with the Y chromosome of the male’s nationality. All males following from this pairing would then only have the Y chromosome of the “other nationality.” This was perfectly acceptable when, as many Han Clothing Movement participants imagine, the Han was a “snowball” nationality (Xu 2012) that would attract women of other backgrounds and incorporate them into a Han patriline unable to be polluted by their female input. Yet the exchange had been inverted in the present, threatening not only the longstanding purity of the Han but also its very existence. Rather than being the nationality that imported women, the Han had become, like the “Indians” described above, a nationality that primarily exported women to be enjoyed by “foreigners” and “black people,” and was thus losing precious resources and witnessing growing threats to survival.

The author continues to describe the purportedly bastardized results of this trend:

There is a well-known fact recognized by Chinese the world over. A child produced from the coupling of a Chinese man and a foreign woman will generally identify as Chinese, will speak Chinese well, and will be recognized within the Chinese community as a mixed-blood child. But a child produced from the coupling of a Chinese woman and a foreign man will not generally identify as Chinese, will speak horrible Chinese, and will be viewed as a mutt within the Chinese community.

The products of these rapidly growing foreign man-Chinese woman pairings will then be less than fully Chinese. And as a result, according to this author's logic, the only possible outcome of this deficit in shared female resources will be the subjugation and eventual extinction of the Han. Just as the Han of the past is presumed to have once assimilated other less exemplary nationalities who are now lost in the annals of history, a similar fate now purportedly awaits the Han of today.

Employing colorful metaphors to characterize such "sexual colonization" as a "grave threat to our national security," the author continues:

Throughout history, in the wars between tribes, nationalities, and nations, the victor has been able to eliminate all of the men on the opposing side, and then make their women into sex slaves and tools of reproduction. There is a line from Cai Wenji's "Poem of Sorrow and Anger (悲憤詩)" to describe this warlike situation: "male heads hang along the side of the forward marching horses, while the women are carried behind." The foreigners and blacks of today are not coming on horses. Instead, they are marching forward with their reproductive organs to conquer China. And indeed, there are no heads hanging from the side of their organs. But each time that one more Chinese woman is conquered by a foreigner or a black man, this means that there will be one more single Chinese man without descendants!

Sexual activity here is neither love nor passion nor even consensual enjoyment. Typical of the emotionally gratifying misrepresentations of nationalist thought, relations between people are alienated through the determinant prism of national identity. Channeling the animalistic urges of sexuality into nationalist gratification, reproduction becomes national war by other means, resulting in either the capture or surrender of women, and the resulting growth or depletion of the populations of pure Han descendants. The author's sexual frustration, projected onto the figure of "foreigners" and "black people," is thereby sublimated into seemingly far more lofty concerns of fundamental national survival and granted an importance which it clearly did not possess previously.

The author concludes by reporting that he has “raised this matter with the relevant departments numerous times, telling them that this phenomenon is a threat to national security,” but that those in power refuse to take concrete steps to protect the nation. Forced to take matters into one’s own hands, the author envisions a far-reaching alliance of collective action to protect his precious national resources:

If you are a representative to the National People’s Congress, please revise the Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China as soon as possible to forbid Chinese women from marrying foreign men. Also, do not grant Chinese citizenship to bastards born of the combination of foreign men and Chinese women. We cannot allow the descendants of foreign men to occupy our educational resources...

If you work in public security, please learn from the police in Russia. If you see a foreigner, check their passports. Also go to schools where foreign instructors are teaching and check their passports in front of their students, to let everyone know that China is not heaven for these foreigners!

If you are a taxi driver, please refuse to accept foreign men or black men accompanied by Chinese women in your cab. There are already some taxi drivers in Guangzhou who have started doing this.

If you own a store, please refuse to sell items to foreign men or black men accompanied by Chinese women.

If you own a restaurant, please refuse to seat foreign men or black men accompanied by Chinese women.

This concluding call for action embodies the Han Clothing Movement’s vision of a nation united in solidarity, a phenomenon that can feel all too rare amidst the chaotic hustle and conflicts of contemporary urban life. And considering the overall tone of the article, this would seem at first to be a nation united in opposition to the growing encroachments of the foreign male. Yet one might note that in the many discriminatory proposals proposed in the name of protecting the nation, there remain two victims: the “foreign man” and the Chinese women.

This vision of a nation united is thus a nation united against its own women. Just as the distinction of man and woman reemerges amidst the celebrated unity of the Han, so this distinction again reemerges amidst the distinction between Chinese and foreigner. Beyond the

anger clearly expressed towards male outsiders in this rhetoric of national unity in sexual warfare, the true target of this author's diatribe remains the women of China, women towards whom he shows a marked degree of ambivalence. Freud aptly characterized ambivalence as a complex combination of desire and hatred (Freud 1989:38), a combination that leads to both conscious and unconscious conflicts and unpredictable emotional swings: phenomena which are all too easily apparent in the preceding passages. On the one hand, women are clearly objects of aggressive desire whom the author aims to possess, and believes that he has the power to possess. On the other hand, however, they are active agents of their own desire whom the author is unable to possess. On the one hand, the author clearly "values" women as objects of desire and as guarantors of the purity of the national line. On the other hand, he fundamentally denies any substantive contribution by women in this national reproductive process, labeling them primarily as containers carrying the pure national DNA of their male counterparts. Conflicted and unable to realize his desires, the author appropriates the idea of the nation and its resources as a means to legitimize and strive towards his fantasy, eliminating his ambivalence towards women through ownership and as a result realizing through pure reproduction a correspondingly pure and ideal nation.

Thus, just as the idea of culture can be used to insert an idealized and "traditional" fantasy of femininity into contemporary women, who are thereby judged according to their conformity to this ideal, so the idea of the nation can be used to falsely stake a claim upon the nation's women as one's own, thereby leaving women to be judged by their male counterparts and presumed owners as to whether they are pure or improper, and whether they are fully contributing, or not, to the sacred mission of national reproduction. Within this national-sexual framework, women are to be cherished and valued as part of the process of national reproduction;

yet it is also precisely on account of their role in the process of national reproduction that they are to be denied fundamental agency and choices. It is because they are so valuable that they are unable to be free. They thus become, as the article's author stated, resources: objects that can be possessed, overseen, and reshaped by their male compatriots, while also being prevented from transgressing the arbitrary and thus all too fragile boundaries of nationhood. In the following section, I analyze my experiences at a training ground for such women, conforming to a male fantasy, realizing themselves through the restrictions of nationality and national mission, and thereby earning themselves the lofty title of "ladies" in neo-traditionalist circles.

### **III. Protecting Tradition with the Men of the Ladies' Academy**

After nearly nine months interacting with members of the Han Clothing Movement and listening to the sorts of xenophobic ideas and quirky conspiracy theories described in the preceding chapters, I planned to take a short break by visiting a so-called traditional "ladies academy" twelve hours away by train. Although affiliated with the Han Clothing Movement and involved in the promotion of Han Clothing, this ladies' academy appeared at first glance considerably more mainstream, or at least somewhat less extreme than the groups with whom I had been spending the majority of my time. Established in the middle of the past decade, this academy has been celebrated in local media as the first women-only traditional educational institution since 1949, and has even been featured in a profile on China Central Television (CCTV). The teachers at the academy also claim that they have been covered in stories by the Associated Press and the Yomiuri Daily, although I was unable to find evidence to substantiate these claims. Regardless, the academy has succeeded in drawing students from the nearby metropolitan area as well as from all over the country, towards the stated mission of recreating



its students in the image of the pure and traditional woman: the “lady.” Towards this goal, students at the academy immerse themselves in the often cited “five millennia of tradition” through a rigorous daily schedule consisting of reading the classics, including the Ming-era “Classic for Girls,” memorizing poetry, learning etiquette, painting, sewing, and the rules of tea ceremony, playing the guqin, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, and, as I noted during my visit, learning to cook traditional Chinese dishes for their teachers at lunch and dinner. A typical schedule, occupying a student’s entire day, reads as follows:

6:00 Wake up  
 7:00 Breakfast  
 8:00 Tao Te Ching study  
 9:00 Etiquette  
 10:00 Guqin  
 11:00 Lunch  
 1:00 Guqin  
 2:30 Tao Te Ching  
 3:30 Etiquette  
 5:00 Dinner  
 6:00-8:00 Study  
 9:30 Bedtime



**Figure 24- The view from the academy's main classroom, providing multiple gated layers of resistance to the polluting city outside.**

The academy occupies a lengthy courtyard located down a narrow, busy alley, with pedestrians, bikes, and motorcycles speeding by, honking their horns, and narrowly missing one another, as well as the smell of pungent street foods floating through the thick air outside. The massive traditional-style door to the school was closed tightly when I arrived one afternoon, almost as if to completely shut out the noise, odors, and chaos of the city outside. Upon entering, I was brought through one layer of the courtyard to another to yet another, with each layer seeming to serve as a defense against the city outside, whose clamor and chaos gradually faded into the remote distance. Eventually, I arrived at a silent classroom deep within where I met three male teachers dressed in Han Clothing sitting around a table sipping tea. An image of Confucius hung from the wall in this sparsely decorated room, where a rare and almost eerie silence

lingered in the midst of this ever-bustling city. Before even introducing themselves, they were quick to ask me about my view of contemporary China, and to inform me that the China that I was visiting, the China outside, was not in fact the “real China.” The true China, they said, could only be found “in here.”

It soon became apparent that perhaps my twelve-hour train ride had not brought me quite so far from where I began. Although this theory of the fundamental unreality of modern society is unanimously promoted throughout the traditionalist groups with whom I conducted research, each wing has a different scapegoat to blame. Han Clothing enthusiasts, as described in the previous chapter, reserve the majority of their wrath for “the Manchus,” while many traditional education enthusiasts show a strong dislike for the New Culture Movement and modern “intellectuals” in general. Having become fascinated with the Manchu conspiracy theories described in the preceding chapter, I asked the head teacher at the Ladies Academy during my stay what he thought of this idea of contemporary Manchu hegemony. He spared no words in describing these ideas as “ludicrous,” and asserted that only “a bunch of idiots” could believe in such theories. At this Ladies’ Academy, the all-male teachers had instead found a new source for all that was wrong with contemporary China: none other than their target students, Chinese women.

In our discussions, the teachers asserted that Chinese civilization had been based from the beginning of time on the delicate balance between *yin* and *yang*, which they read as equivalent to a balance between male and female. In a familiar pattern, a past moment of perfect balance was posited, in relation to which the present can only be a downfall. This balance between *yin* and *yang*, they told me, had been lost in the past two centuries. When I asked what they meant by this “loss of balance,” the main teacher leaned forward and said quite directly, “nowadays in China,

men aren't like men, and women aren't like women." Society, he told me, is backwards: it makes people unlike themselves, making the ugly beautiful and the beautiful ugly. And his goal in this academy was to make things right again, so that beauty can again be recognized as beauty.

Taking a few steps back to pre-modern history to understand this "beauty," one teacher proudly told me that pre-1911 China was the most free and democratic society that ever existed. It was, he claimed, a society based on balance, or a certain harmony between the heavens, the earth, and the people. Everyone had a clear place or ranking within society, and as a result, society ran smoothly. And although this is of course a retroactive idealization benefiting from distance, this all seemed very real to him. Women, he emphasized, also had their clear role in this pre-modern society, or to be more specific, outside of society. He referred to one version of the myth of Nüwa and Fuxi, two of the mythical figures found in the national chromosomes described above, to argue that there had been natural gender differences from the very beginning of time: while Fu Xi reigned as a sovereign, Nüwa was primarily a mother. This is how things had been, and how they should be again, he emphasized. Providing further "evidence," he pointed to the Han Clothing that he was wearing, in which the right side of the robe is placed on the inside, while the left side of the robe crosses over on top. He told me that the right side represents the feminine while the left side represents the masculine (男左女右). His Han Clothing, purportedly emerging at the beginning of civilization and existing unchanged into the present, thus symbolically carried a fundamental truth, symbolizing the proper relations between the sexes: *yang* as male is meant to be on the outside, while *yin* as female is meant to be on the inside. Or in other, more direct words, he told me, women are supposed to be at home. However, with the introduction of what he called the "Western idea of gender equality" (cf. Afary and

Anderson 2005) in the twentieth century, this perfectly balanced society had been thrown out of balance.

These comments, which could only be described accurately as sexist, were disguised in the notions of “culture” and “nation” in an attempt to at once abstract them from actual human relations and to legitimize, naturalize, and eternalize them. The teachers expressed their ideas in the mystical language of *yin* and *yang*, citing as well the supposed division of labor between the mythical figures Nüwa and Fuxi, presenting their prejudiced ideas as part of an eternal and natural “tradition” extending from the beginning of time to the present (Bourdieu 2001). Furthermore, by using the term “the Western idea of gender equality,” the teachers created an all too appealing (and all too common) binary relationship between China and the West which presents equality between the sexes (and other values) as a non-Chinese idea and hence as unnatural in this cultural sphere: appealing to the idea of identity in order to rationalize conservatism, the idea of gender equality then becomes a case of national inequality or of supposed cultural imperialism which must be resisted for the dignity of the nation as a whole. And while it may be granted that gender equality was certainly not a prominent component of Chinese traditional culture, it would also not be an exaggeration to say that gender equality has not been a major component of any pre-modern culture. Cultures nevertheless change, thankfully. By expressing their ideas through the metaphor of an eternal national tradition, this change is renounced, and sexism is illusorily made to appear not as sexism, but as a “natural” and “correct” viewpoint in need of protection from the cruel depredations of the outside world.

In contrast to traditional society, in which everyone had and knew their “proper role,” the teachers characterized contemporary society as having lost all balance between *yin* and *yang*.

This imbalance and shattering of conventional boundaries was metaphorically expressed by one teacher through an allegory of the city walls located a few blocks away from the academy. He told me that in the early 1950s, during the period typically referred to as “Liberation,” the walls of the city in which the academy is located were destroyed, leaving only narrow rivers as the barrier between the city and its surroundings. The academy’s founder appeared to ascribe a certain historical-immunizing role to these city walls, asserting that since their destruction, all sorts of “poison” (毒) had been entering into the city day after day, for decades on end. The rivers that surround the edge of the city, while purportedly unable to block the entry of such poisons, nevertheless hinder their exit, such that these poisons linger and build up within the urban environment, creating a thoroughly imbalanced and overly feminine-dominated (陰) environment with massive social repercussions. Conveniently, within such an environment polluted by *yin* poison, even social issues conventionally attributed to men could thereby be attributed to women.

For example, one day during discussion, a teacher asked me: why do you think that men in China nowadays go out to dinner every night with colleagues, forcing each other to drink, and then go to nightclubs or barbershops or saunas? Answering his own question, he told me that these phenomena exist because women “are not at home anymore.” Even when a woman is physically at home, he claimed, her heart is not there (心不在家裏). The result, he asserted, is that men nowadays are similarly not at home. This was not an issue in traditional China, where everyone knew their proper place. An essay composed by a teacher and distributed as a handout at the academy read:

Taking a look at women nowadays, all that is on their minds is freedom, liberation, independence, and taking charge. They have long ago lost their genuine selves... the hegemony of the Western barbarians' (西夷) ideas of "freedom," "democracy," and "human rights" has erased our natural ways and made the harmony of the past lost forever!

Such an invocation of tradition is a complex rhetorical move, in that the author raises certain social issues in contemporary China that are often related to men, such as binge drinking or the sex industry, but claims to find the fundamental problem solely in women, whose deviation from longstanding traditional and thus correct models of being had threatened the stability of society as a whole.

Yet for all of its seeming complexity, this was a rhetorical move with which I would come to be quite familiar during my stay at the academy. Producing a similarly imaginative analysis of the milk powder scandal of 2008, this same teacher traced the source of this crisis not to immoral business practices wherein poisonous chemicals could be placed in milk powders in order to ensure profits, producing kidney stones in innocent consumers. Rather, to my surprise, the source of this crisis was to be found, in his interpretation, in women. In traditional China, he told me, a woman would stay at home and feed her baby her breast milk. But now, he claimed, women go out to work, or their hearts simply are not "at home," and babies are left with nothing but milk powder. Thus, if women were doing what they were "supposed" to do according to "tradition," namely overseeing the domestic sphere which is their responsibility as representatives of the domestic *yin*, there would have been no milk powder scandal.

Another teacher at the academy pursued a similar line of argument in his analysis of materialism in society, attributing the perverse power of money within contemporary society to so-called "money worshipping women" (拜金女). Here, this teacher tapped into a broader

misogynistic discourse in contemporary Chinese popular culture, wherein the phrase “money worshipping women” is a common denunciatory saying, while the notion of any corresponding “money worshipping man” (拜金男) remains completely unspoken and un-thought. Even an official *China Daily* editorial entitled “We are on the wrong path of money worship”<sup>34</sup> clumsily only cites examples of women worshipping money, portraying men as victims of “young girls' mercenary attitude toward marriage” and predicting nothing less than the resulting “degradation of our society.” Of course, if we took a deep breath and a step back to look at society as a whole, rather than focusing upon women’s money worship as potentially degrading society, it would be more accurate to argue that contemporary Chinese society is a money worshipping society which therefore naturally contains a number of money worshipping women, as well as the often overlooked money worshipping men. In recent decades, the revolutionary capital which played such an essential role in self-presentation and self-promotion in the Maoist era has been replaced by monetary capital, which plays an equally important role in self-presentation; correspondingly, the announcement and celebration of each supernatural accomplishment of the spiritual atomic bomb of Mao Zedong Thought has been replaced by the perpetual announcement and celebration of new celestial economic figures. Power and money are intertwined. Within this social context, the widely discussed “money worshipping women” are part of a larger money worshipping society. Yet by transferring this discomfiting fact “onto women’s bodies and female sexuality” (Zhong 2000:13), the uncomfortable truth of a money worshipping society is denied and reversed, misrecognizing the product and the producer by projecting blame onto women as the source of all problems, while by extension portraying the man, the only other component in society, as the

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<sup>34</sup> “We are on the wrong path of money worship.” By Gao Qihui, *China Daily*, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-06/24/content\\_10013634.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-06/24/content_10013634.htm)



eternally innocent victim. As a side note to this commentary, I was not surprised to learn during my stay that all three of the male teachers at this Ladies' Academy were single.

Although women are targeted as the source of all problems in contemporary society by the academy's teachers, we should remember that they are also the academy's only students. Claiming to have found the source of a wide range of contemporary social issues in imbalanced gender relations and in modern women in particular, the solution to these issues according to the academy's teachers could also only be found through women. Women, in their analysis, are to be transformed from modern misrepresentations of womanhood into real ladies (淑女), so that modern China, which can only ever be a corruption of the ideal of China, might be transformed into the real China.

What, then, is a lady? One early morning, I asked the main teacher this question over tea. Unsurprisingly, he was certain that he had the answer, and could provide very clear standards to which a lady must "conform." He listed five core characteristics:

1. Diligent (勤勞)
2. Kind (善良)
3. Has a sense of right and wrong, knows "her place" (有規矩/知天地)
4. Has a tradition to continue, or heritage from the past to deliver to the future (有傳承)
5. Pure (純潔)

The vision of a "lady" presented here is clearly limiting, based upon obligations rather than rights. And other than the fourth trait, each is an obligation that can be judged by external observers: whether or not one is diligent, whether or not one is kind, whether or not one is pure,

and whether or not one knows one's place. Enacting this judgment, the teachers unabashedly presumed that these characteristics were lacking at the precise moment that they were stated, and that they thus needed to be cultivated at their academy.

But how are these missing values to be realized? There are two revealing features of this academy that stand out from my time conducting research there: the first is that none of the teachers at this “ladies academy” are actually ladies. Ironically, they are all men, teaching ladies how to be ladies. The relationship between male and female is thus made into a relationship between teacher and student, superior and inferior. A second characteristic that the teachers continually emphasized during our discussions is that the school is designed to be like a home: although this “home” has another quite illuminating layer of meaning. Explaining his conception of the school as a home one afternoon during my stay, the main teacher drew this graph in my notebook, micro-analyzing the Chinese characters that formed the words education and awakening:

家		Home	
教	育	Teaching	Development (=Education)
學	覺	Learning	Sense (=Awakening)
陽	陰	Yang (=Male)	Yin (=Female)

Upon completing this graph, he told me that education in the past took place in homes, or private academies (私塾), creating an all-encompassing sphere of learning in which one would not only study but also live and thereby grow. He contrasted this with the large schools and universities of

the present, enacting what he called their “Western industrialized model of education” (西方工業化教育模式). Based in this ideal of the all-encompassing sphere of learning, this ladies’ academy was located in a traditional courtyard setting, and was supposed to be like a “new home” for a new vision of society, in opposition to the society locked safely outside. In this graph, immediately below home, the ideal of the school, the teacher wrote *jiaoyu* (education) as two separate characters, aiming to emphasize the distinction between *jiao* and *yu*. *Jiao*, he told me, is the process of teaching. *Yu*, by contrast, refers to the learning process or the environment. The goal of education, he told me, is not only to provide the teaching but also to provide a proper environment to *fayu* (發育), to develop. He then paused, looked at me intently, and said, “an environment to develop, just like a baby in a uterus.” Thus, *jiao* relates to *yang*, concept associated with masculinity, while *yu* relates to *yin*. The two characters of *xue* and *jue* similarly reflect this binary division. *Xue* is a process of learning, but it also has to rely on *jue*, which refers to one’s sense of one’s environment, or one’s experience of this uterus-like space which is to sustain one and support one’s development. Encompassing both sides of the graph was this new “home” which the academy’s male teachers had founded and overseen.

This was all quite puzzling. Yet perhaps the most puzzling aspect was the combination of, on the one hand, all-male teachers and, on the other hand, the metaphor of an educational uterus: the intersection of men and their control over a ladies’ educational institution as control over an imaginary uterus giving birth to a newly balanced society unable to be produced through conventional means of birth which pass through the presumed source of pollution. The male teachers had created a space in which they incorporated both sides of this graph which they drew, both the masculine and the feminine, under their own male control. This ladies’ academy was

then envisioned as a home without mothers or even a uterus outside of a mother. It was a pure space owned by all male teachers, who biologically cannot give birth and who inevitably come from women, instead giving birth to new women, or ladies, to save society from the women of the present. Hence, despite its stated goal of educating women, this ladies' academy is in fact the ultimate misogynistic fantasy in which all problems are attributed to women, who are out of their natural place; and all of the solutions are in the hands of the men, whose job it is to put everything back into its proper place: to return to the idealized balance between *yin* and *yang* through their encompassment and control of both.

To provide proof of the happy and healthy babies emerging from their educational uterus, the teachers showed me two pictures before I departed, smiling like proud parents. One was of a fairly attractive young woman with a big smile on her face: her hair was dyed blonde, and she wore a very short jean skirt and a tank top revealing her belly button ring. A second picture showed a woman dressed in white Han Clothing, looking sternly at the camera without a smile, standing next to an older woman in a button-down white shirt. Returning to the motif of side-by-side images from which this chapter began, although the women in the two pictures indeed looked completely different, I was informed that they were in fact photos of a single graduate of this academy. The first photo had been taken prior her education. The teachers told me that she had been living a "wild life," creating all types of trouble, and that her parents had no idea how to respond and resolve this situation. Desperate to find a solution to this dilemma, her parents forcibly sent her to this ladies' academy. And although she ran away at first, she eventually came back, and was able to develop within the environment of the "ladies' academy," to rediscover her "true self" in lady-hood, eventually quitting her partying ways and taking up the very lady-like hobby of embroidery. In light of my corrupted non-traditional tastes, it is perhaps no surprise that

I found the first image considerably more attractive than the second. Yet in light of their preferences, it is also no surprise that the three teachers at the academy could not have been prouder of the second image. One teacher pointed to the second picture, telling me that for the sake of my research I needed to remember that image. “This is how a lady should look,” he said.

In discussion with the three female students living at this academy during my time there, they did not seem to disagree. Besides its inherently limiting nature, the other most striking aspect of the academy’s representation of women was the degree to which it was embraced by the academy’s students. A young woman who came from rural Sichuan all of the way to the east coast of China to learn how to be a lady was completing her month of intensive study at the academy during my research visit. Over a celebratory dinner during her last night at the academy, one of the teachers asked what she planned to do upon returning to rural Sichuan. She said that she planned to stay at home, pursuing her new lady-like hobbies, while the males of her village lined up outside her home, eager to marry her. The main teacher explained to me all too directly that this student had been unable to find a boyfriend for years, on account of her “rough” (粗) nature. Eager to blossom into a true lady in order to appeal to men, she had come to the ladies’ academy, and in her brief tenure there had begun wearing Han Clothing on a daily basis, mastered the intricacies of traditional etiquette, studied the Chinese classics, and learned to play the *guqin*. Yet these very traditional aspects of “lady-hood” in all of their ancient allure were directed towards very contemporary and immediate concerns of finding an ideal partner and getting married. As was the case with much of the traditionalism that I encountered throughout my fieldwork, the notion of the “lady” was a more of a response to contemporary anxieties and uncertainties than a continuation of an actual lasting tradition. Belying this often perplexing

mixture of the past and the present, this young lady from Sichuan asked over dinner whether upon graduation she might be issued an official “ladies’ certification” (淑女証), which she could show to potential suitors to verify that she was in fact a lady. The academy’s teachers agreed that they would consider this possibility, but soon thereafter reconsidered and asserted that true ladyhood was a beauty that, as noted above, could only “shine from the inside out.”

Caught between imaginings of the past and the realities of the present, I agreed with the founders and teachers of this academy that there are problems in contemporary Chinese society, as is true of any society or system. In their reflections upon the current state of urban society, they indeed have recognized issues that need to be examined more closely. Yet in their eagerness to find a single cause for these issues, they have misrecognized their origins. And in their self-congratulation at finding a solution to all of contemporary society’s dilemmas in a misogynistic fantasy, I could not help but feel that they might only be creating a new problem.

#### **IV. Prince**

In the final days of my research, the Guangzhou Han Clothing Movement was scheduled to perform at a Tourism Festival for Zhu Village (珠村) on the remote outskirts of Guangzhou. Collaborating with the local tourism bureau, members of the Guangzhou Movement participating in the festival received special treatment: a block of motel rooms with semi-functional air conditioning had been reserved across the street from the festival for movement participants to cool off and nap during the day, enjoy box upon Styrofoam box of pre-cooked carry-out at mealtimes, and rest overnight in preparation for the two-day festival which, as I had already come to expect, began all too bright and early at 8:00am on a Saturday morning. In return for

these luxuries, the entire tourism festival was built not around Zhu Village but rather around Han Clothing performances, likely because Zhu Village, upon closer inspection, did not actually offer many other features that might draw visitors to a tourism festival. Granted, there were stories of fairies and other magical events from the past, advertised with colorful illustrations hanging on the outer gates of the park that held the festival. But as I wandered beyond the park through the narrow alleyways of the village, dodging motorcycles and breathing in the second-hand smoke of those walking in front of me, one could not help but notice that these fairies were long gone. In their place, performers from the Guangzhou Han Clothing Movement had arrived to reenact the certain yet all too distant magic of the past.

Because this was a two-day festival, the organizers solicited ideas from participants for performances in the weeks preceding. Perhaps because the Han Clothing Movement as a whole is based precisely in such a desire to perform and to display oneself, the response was overwhelming, providing sufficient fodder to fill an entire day from 8:00am to 6:00pm. A number of performances were fairly predictable stock acts, undoubtedly familiar to anyone who had spent any time with the movement. We had the showcase of different styles of Han Clothing, an acted dialogue explaining Han Clothing to the uninitiated, the display of male and female etiquette, the *guqin* performance, and the calligraphy display. Exhausted by the blistering August sun of Southern China, most participants spent the day crowded in the semi-air-conditioned rooms in the motel across the street, descending to the festival below only at their designated performance time. Occasionally visiting the motel rooms to chat with friends and enjoy a taste of slightly cooler air, I nevertheless spent the majority of my time observing performances alongside the residents of Zhu Village, who seemed genuinely puzzled and amused by the nostalgic performances of their urban neighbors, and who were extremely curious about the sole

“foreigner” accompanying these performers. A series of quite standard inquiries followed me throughout the weekend: “Where are you from?” “Can you understand me?” “Can we take a picture together?”

Soon after one such exchange, I met a new face in the Han Clothing Movement. Heavily made-up with foundation, blush, and lipstick, and wearing light pink Han Clothing, bright red socks, and ballet shoes, “Prince (王子),” as he called himself, did not match the stereotypical vision of the true Han man which many fellow Han Clothing enthusiasts embraced. Prince told me that he worked in an office job in downtown Guangzhou, and that he had discovered Han Clothing while searching the Internet at work. He had immediately fallen in love with Han Clothing, he said, on account of its elegance and beauty. As his interest continued to deepen in recent months, he had purchased two sets of Han Clothing, including the light pink outfit that he was wearing that day. Yet he told me that he had been hesitant to join in the Han Clothing activities frequently held in Guangzhou. Only when he saw the online announcement that the local movement association was seeking performers for this tourism festival did he decide that he was ready to join. Because, he said with a slight dramatic flair, the one thing that he loved more than Han Clothing was dancing: and he was prepared to bring his two loves together that afternoon in a dance performance, finally joining fellow Han Clothing enthusiasts in their celebration of Han Clothing and culture.

When the time arrived for Prince to perform later that afternoon, the host of the show introduced his dance with an awkward smile, saying, “Here’s Prince, a new participant. He is going to dance for us this afternoon.” As the music began, filling the stuffy afternoon air with a longing female voice singing against a melody that combined symphonic flair and pop rhythms, Prince proceeded to engage in a dance that, to say the least, did not quite conform to standard



Han Clothing imaginings of the traditional man. His interpretation of the song seemed to more closely resemble modern dance than anything “traditional,” although he did add a few pirouettes into the mix for good measure. Fluttering across the stage with a dramatic and focused look upon his face, Prince seemed absorbed in the music and completely unfazed by the largely confused glances of the audience and the growing anxious giggles and eager whispers of his fellow Han Clothing enthusiasts. Reaching a dramatic climax in step with the concluding crescendo of the music, Prince stood briefly frozen in his position, standing on his toes with his



**Figure 25- Prince performing in Zhu Village, August 2011**

arms extended upwards into the air, as the host proceeded outwards onto the stage and said with a giggle, “thank you very much your dance, Prince. You danced very pretty (跳得很漂亮).” Prince smiled and bowed towards the audience in the traditional style taught earlier that day, while the Han Clothing Movement participants standing around me smiled knowingly to one another.

Prince did not join in the group dinner that evening, departing the festival soon after his dance. He did return the next afternoon for his second performance, which received similarly superficial support from the group, combined with the usual awkward laughter. And then, again, he left. A few casual comments amongst movement participants that afternoon earned some laughs at Prince’s expense behind his back, calling him “Queen” (女王) rather than Prince (王子), and suggesting that “he is clearly trying to hang out with the wrong group.” My own empathy with Prince and suggestions that others engage with him just like any other participant were deemed to be reflections of my unrealistic “Western” attitude. “You might have people over there in America who act like that. But here, we don’t act like that.” When I asked what was meant by “that,” my acquaintance could only reply, “just... just like that.”

This answer is, in the end, the real tragedy of the Han Clothing Movement. As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the Movement provides a rare space of solace for those who feel excluded or alienated from the rapid and often disorienting change of recent years. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I met people who were unemployed or who toiled away their days in dead-end jobs, people whose emotional lives and love lives were reliably unstable, people who faced unrealistic pressures from family members or significant others, people who were alienated, disheartened, and even outraged by the current sociopolitical milieu, and people who simply may have never been made to feel that they were special or even wanted. In the time

that I spent with Han Clothing enthusiasts, I came to feel a strong sense of sympathy for participants and the motivations that were bringing them into this movement, despite the fact that I disagreed strongly with the results of their participation. Yet I recognize that in light of the uncertainties, challenges, and indignities that they faced, nothing could be more reassuring than the idea that they were members of an oppressed minority, prevented from realizing the true splendor of their existence, and that the social world in which they lived was not in fact the “real China.” This search for the real China was in reality a search for a whole and redeeming self.

Yet despite the fact that the Han Clothing Movement is in the end a massive living metaphor for a feeling of having been excluded from the ideal of China, the ideal image constructed and enacted by movement participants in response to this exclusion was based upon an even more totalizing and exclusionary logic, developing a rigid and homogenizing vision that was all too certain of its own characteristics and all too eager to pronounce, as the informant described above stated, that “we don’t act like that.” From the paranoid myths surrounding the Manchus and their purported preferential treatment of China’s minority nationalities described in the previous chapter, to the possessive and puritan ideals of the “proper” Han lady analyzed in this chapter, to the almost reflexive mockery and exclusion of “Prince” described in this section, the other side of the Han Clothing Movement’s perpetual search for an ideal identity is far too often a forcible homogenization and exclusion of those who do not abide fully by the rules of this identity. As a result, a movement whose participants sought solace from the present all too often devolved into a new medium of exclusion. And as a result, my sympathies for participants often stopped at their proud appropriation of Han-ness.

As stated in the previous section’s discussion of the Ladies’ Academy, the Han Clothing Movement as a whole has indeed emerged from very real challenges and tensions in the

experience of contemporary Chinese society. Yet there remains a fundamental distinction between recognizing or responding to a problem and solving this problem. And sometimes, as in this case, the solution proposed becomes a problem itself. The Han Clothing Movement, which responds to discrepancies between the ideals and the experience of the nation through a reaffirmation of the ideals of national identity, is a classic example of precisely such a dilemma, reaffirming a problem through its illusory solution. As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, nations are comprised of immensely complex spaces and experiences which do not yield to our imaginings or hopes, and never will. By responding to the resulting dilemmas of national and personal identity with yet another affirmation of national (and by extension personal) identity, presenting in this case an even more rigid and unyielding vision in hopes of a final resolution, participants in the Han Clothing Movement are tasting the proverbial hair of the dog that bit them. Ironically, the primary outcome is a perpetuation of the dilemmas which motivated their participation in the first place, alongside the opening up of new zones of subjugation and exclusion for those who do not conform to the standards of the heterosexual and patriotic Han men or demure and virginal Han women. The hopes and realities, thrills and disappointments, and inclusions and exclusions of the nation and identity thus become the primary engine of their reproduction over time, despite, or rather precisely because of, their perpetually elusive nature.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Real China beyond Han Clothing**

Although Han Clothing has grown rapidly over the past decade from a largely unknown (or not yet invented) style of clothing to a movement extending to cities throughout China, there is still no denying that despite its universalist aspirations the Han Clothing Movement as a whole exists on the edge of contemporary society. The movement has been the focus of the foregoing analyses not only because it presents a fascinating ethnographic case but also because it reveals important aspects of the human relationship to national identity and the national imaginary, highlighting the imagining, frustration, and reimagining characteristic of the process of national identification. In order to expand the insights derived from this ethnographic case, this concluding chapter examines a series of structurally similar phenomena in contemporary Chinese society. Through these brief studies, I aim, on the one hand, to demonstrate that the Han Clothing Movement is not an isolated anomaly in the current sociohistorical context, and, on the other hand, to show how the preceding analyses may illuminate a broader spectrum of sociocultural developments in contemporary China.

#### **I. Visiting a Confucian Academy**

During a visit to the city of Haikou in Southern China to make a presentation, I set aside a few days to visit a recently established Confucius Academy. The academy's guiding principle is to "promote education in the classics and build a harmonious society" in a quiet, clean, and sunny learning environment. Reaffirming neo-traditionalists' notable tendency to start the day

early, the founder of the academy insisted on picking me up at my motel in downtown Haikou at 7:30am on the first day of my visit. When he arrived in a van with the school's name plastered on the side, I learned that every day at the Confucius Academy began at 5:30am, so I was already running quite late by 7:30. As the school's founder recounted his own training and the founding and growth of the school, we drove at terrifyingly high speeds out from the center of the city, speeding along ever further for an hour, until we arrived in the countryside of rural Hainan Province. Finally, we pulled into a community of dusty villas located in the countryside near the ocean. As we arrived at the parking area outside the school, the lot was occupied by roosters, ducks, and most unexpectedly a very large cow. "We grow and raise all our own food, organically. That's the only way to be healthy," the school's founder explained as I wandered past the livestock into the school building.

Proceeding into the building, our first stop was a classroom, where a cacophony of voices immediately overwhelmed me. During my stay at this institution, all of the students were reading the Book of Changes (易經), which not exactly light reading for the school's target student base between the ages of 2 and 10. As I glanced into the classroom, its walls covered in calligraphy, students recited one section of the Book of Changes over and over, incessantly. I soon learned that the academy's curriculum had divided the classics into sections, and that the classes that occupied students' days consisted solely of reading and re-reading each section aloud one hundred times. Upon completion of the hundredth reading, students would then proceed onward to the next section of the Book of Changes, which would be similarly recited a hundred times. This process would be repeated one passage at a time until the entire book had been read, at

which point everyone was scheduled to proceed to a reading of the equally popular page-turner the Classic of History (尚書).

Yet it was not only the cyclical recitation of the Book of Changes that formed this overwhelming cacophony. For the reading of the classics in this school was also accompanied by two cassettes, played at high volume from tape players in two corners of the room. One tape consisted of classical Chinese music. And listening closely, I found that the second tape was a recording in British English, seemingly of poems: as I strained to decipher the words, the school's founder informed me that the cassette was a recitation of Shakespeare's Sonnets. During a later meeting, when I jokingly asked if he worried that students might have headaches from the classroom environment, he eagerly cited "studies in neuroscience" to argue that children are uniquely adept at absorbing input from their environment. Children from birth through the age of 13 are like sponges, he told me, taking in whatever surrounds them; and his job was to provide the "input." Drawing upon this fairly simplistic caricature of the sponge, he had set up all of the classrooms on this triple-classical model: students were to read the classics, while at the same time absorbing the classical music and the classical English poetry. Depending upon one's perspective, the result was either auditory chaos or a stimulating educational environment for children. And regardless of one's perspective, all the students at the academy spent nearly nine hours between 5:30am and 8:30pm six days a week engaged in this "learning" environment.

Although this Confucius Academy would at first glance appear to be based in the past and "tradition," much like the Han Clothing Movement its origins and priorities are to be found in the present, particularly in the concerns surrounding contemporary education and modernity. During discussions in the academy's office, the school's founder stated that education is without

a doubt the greatest concern facing today's China. Education is a worry that faces everyone, he said, because everyone eventually has children. For decades, people have worried and discussed how to solve the dilemmas and pitfalls facing education, characterized by rote memorization, unnecessary pressures and competition, and a single-minded focus upon test scores. Most disconcertingly, he told of a meeting that he held with middle-school teachers in a nearby town, who in the preceding months had seen two of their students commit suicide. There are children selling organs for iPads, or selling themselves for money: what kind of a system, he asked, drives middle-school students to such behavior? Clearly, he had identified a pressing social issue in contemporary society. And equally clearly, he was confident that he found and begun implementing the solution: traditional education. As was the case with Han Clothing, the source of the fascination with the past is to be found in the present and its discontents.

And, as was the case with Han Clothing, another solution had been discovered, providing a seemingly certain panacea to any and all problems of the present. This solution, the academy's educational model, was first developed by Taiwanese scholar Wang Tsai-kuei, a jovial and charismatic individual with some offbeat and reliably self-celebratory views on pedagogy who has been promoting the study of China's classics for nearly two decades. Wang has compiled a collection of Chinese classics for the modern student, consisting of the Great Learning (大學), the Doctrine of the Mean (中庸), the Analects (論語), selections from the writings of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-tzu, Mencius (孟子), the Book of Odes (詩經), the Book of Changes (易經), the Classic of History (尚書), the Yellow Emperor's Classic on Internal Medicine (皇帝內經), the Classic of Filial Piety (孝經), Standards for Being a Good Student (弟子規), the Three-Character Classic (三字經), the Thousand-Character Classic (千字經), and, interestingly, Shakespeare's



Midsummer Night's Dream and Sonnets. The academy in Haikou is but one branch of a larger traditional education movement based in this curriculum that has risen to prominence in the past decade and that extends to cities throughout China. The goal of this program, represented by the always colorful Wang, who oversees the training of all academy heads in Beijing, is to provide the type of broad and well-rounded education imagined to have been realized in the past, covering philosophy, history, religion, literature and science. The product of such an education is presumed to be nothing short of pure genius, hence explaining the imagined charmed and carefree existence of the people of the past. Repeating an assertion that I had come to hear many times throughout my research, the school's founder declared that "our ancestors were considerably more intelligent than any of us nowadays. They already had solutions to many of the problems that we face today."

The goal, then, is to recapture this imagined genius, its answers, and the splendor thus produced. Yet where was the downfall from this magic moment? In place of the depredations of the Manchus as imagined by the Han Clothing Movement, or the Western notion of gender equality criticized by the Ladies' Academy's teachers, Wang and his followers attribute the collapse of Chinese education, and by extension China as a whole, to the anti-traditionalist New Culture and May Fourth Movements. Prior to the New Culture Movement, they assert, all educated people could read and write in Classical Chinese, and thus had a connection to a culture extending across five millennia. This cultural wealth, presumed to be unparalleled relative to the rest of the world, provided the foundation for the equally unparalleled intelligence and thus charmed existence of the ancestors. Yet the May Fourth Movement's emphasis upon the use of vernacular language in writing, promoted as a means of expanding literacy, was in fact a step towards the desacralization of traditional Chinese knowledge as a whole, and thus the

disenchantment of Chinese existence as a whole. The best of intentions thus produced the worst of results, according to this narrative, insofar as “the Chinese” as a whole were cut off from their cultural tradition and national essence, transforming an imagined traditional land of supernatural powers and serenity into just another place on the world map.

This antagonistic relationship to the defining cultural movement of modern China translates into a similarly antagonistic relationship to contemporary Chinese culture and society as a whole, with its dangerous modern media, polluted foods, hectic streets, and lost morals. Characterizing modern life as a degradation of humanity’s potential, the academy is located in a remote rural setting without access to television, newspapers, computers, or other contemporary forms of entertainment, and self-sustaining by right of its own organic farm from which each meal is prepared and in which all students work every Sunday afternoon. From this immunized base, a Confucianized new Yenan, the revitalization of traditional education is to produce the revitalization of traditional culture, reversing the disenchanting turn of modernity.

Searching for another example to prove the infinite power of traditional education for a nation, the school’s founder suddenly took the discussion in a direction that I had not expected. He asserted with a polite smile that although “the Jews” make up just .3% of the world’s population, they have won over 30% of Nobel Prizes. And despite the fact that “the Jews” are a clear minority in comparison to other considerably more populous nationalities of the world, he declared, they nevertheless clearly control the entire global finance system and run the world. So, how do “the Jews” do it, he asked. According to Wang’s educational philosophy, the perceived “magic of the Jews” can be traced back to their reading the classics (讀經). From a young age, he asserts, all Jewish children read and memorize the torah. This activates their brains, maintains

their connection with their national essence, and promotes their national spirit, which then empowers them to play a decisive role in such adult matters as running the world. The point to be derived from this example, according to the school's founder, is that if China wants to be strong and play an important role in the world, then China must do the same. Of course, he adds with a hearty laugh, he does not mean that Chinese children should study the Torah! Instead, in order to be like "the Jews," Chinese students must study their own classics, which are of course, he emphasizes, more numerous and better than the Torah.

Because the sacred within this imaginary is a moment in the past which none of us in the present have experienced, its imagining can expand without any limits. And because the disenchanted and non-sacred state of existence to which it is opposed is to be found in the present which we all experience on a daily basis, its shortcomings, challenges, and failures are all too apparent. Much like the Han Clothing Movement, the promise of transcending this founding divide serves as the engine of this educational movement. And by an inverted yet somehow consistent logic, a thoroughly impractical and unrealistic educational program becomes the basis for imagined supernatural achievements. After all, many Chinese students study science, but how many of them study science through the Yellow Emperor's Classic on Internal Medicine? Many Chinese students study English, but how many begin from Shakespeare's Sonnets? The mysticism inherent within Wang's pedagogical approach, presumed to be tapping into a magical and long-lost essence, fosters the mysticism of its imagined results. The school's founder asserted that, upon completing the course of studies provided at the Confucian Academy, a student could do anything and test into anywhere. They could probably even skip high school and test directly into Peking or Tsinghua University, he asserted. In a pattern seen throughout my research, what was lacking in evidence was supplemented by confidence.

During my days at the academy, I attempted to abide by the study patterns of the average student, despite being twenty years their senior, so as to develop a clearer understanding of the effects of this mystical curriculum. As mentioned above, the day begins at 5:30am: the school's founder claims that Chinese medicine has proven that it is beneficial to wake up early in the morning, because it makes one stronger. After everyone has arisen, they proceed to the central hall of the academy to pay their respects to Confucius. One student first lit incense before an image of Confucius hanging from the wall, and then proceeded to bow three times towards the image. The entire student body would then follow this student's example. A teacher would then step forward to read an excerpt from the Analects, which would in turn be repeated line by line by the students. Finally, everyone would turn to bow before the image of Confucius yet again, marking a sacred start to the day. Catering to more profane concerns, this ritual was followed by morning exercises, which featured on alternating days tai chi, yoga, and martial arts. The reliably warm weather in Hainan meant that morning exercises could be conducted outside year round, providing an opportunity for the academy's young and lively students to release some of their energies before the day's overwhelmingly sedentary studies officially begin.

With the exception of meals from the school's farm and a calligraphy class in the afternoon, the rest of the day is occupied by reading the classics, as noted above. From my observations, the effect of being in class as a section of the obscure Book of Changes was read over and over was nothing short of hypnotic. At first, one can follow the characters word by word, and can attempt to make sense of what is read, with the words circulating repeatedly within one's head. But then as they continue to read, students would often begin tapping on the tables or tapping their feet, seemingly to keep the rhythm of the text. And as they tap along with the rhythm of the reading, the rhythm ever so gradually accelerates and then decelerates, before

finally accelerating again. Combined with the classical Chinese music and the Shakespearean sonnets playing out of tape players on either side of the room, everything comes together into one spellbinding pile of chaotic sounds. Then suddenly, the teacher leading the recitation would come to a sudden stop, announcing that they have completed their hundred readings of that section. And we would then proceed to the next section, which would be repeated over and over, bringing us back in to the hypnosis of the text.

The unyielding repetition which is the central daily experience at this academy brings us back to the point from which this study began, namely the distinction between the ideas or images surrounding an imagined community and the actual existence and experience of that community. The inevitable distinction between these two realms produces disappointment, and as a result generates an ever greater yearning for the always elusive ideal. Here, the classics with their mystical and purportedly timeless wisdom embody the ideal which must be brought into the real, again to “save China.” And the unending repetition characteristic of the experience of the classics at this academy embodies the insistence of this elusive signifier, and the determination of those who live in the shadow of these ideas to fuse communication with reality. Combined with the social alienation produced by the academy’s location, the act of repetitive reading is similar to the clothing, rituals, and photographs analyzed in Chapter 5: steps are enacted repeatedly towards a particular ideal image, and attempts are made to ensure that this image is stabilized and persists across time. Alongside this repetition, the required bodily comportment of students emphasizes this desire to organize and arrange everything perfectly, despite the reliable resistance of the real world. In each classroom in the academy, a sign posted on the wall reads:

兩腳平放 腰部挺直

Place your feet on the ground, and sit up straight

坐姿端正 左手壓書

Sit properly, with your left hand holding the book

右手指字 眼不斜視

Follow the words with your right hand, and don't let your eyes stray

嘴巴出聲 正規指讀

Read out loud, read according to the standards.

The micro-management of every detail, from the placement of feet, hands, and eyes, to the obsessive repetition, clearly belies the yearning anxiety surrounding the lack of correspondence between the awe-inspiring ideals expressed in the texts and the realities within which the academy exists. This obsessive focus upon detail and insistent repetition within the detached and safely self-enclosed space of the academy expresses again the desire to create an alternate reality embodying the “real China” against the real China, one day at a time.

## II. Jiang Qing's Confucian Constitutionalism

Undoubtedly the most prominent proponent of neo-traditionalism in contemporary China is Jiang Qing (蔣慶), whose ideas on Confucian constitutionalism have graced the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* (Jiang and Bell 2012) and most recently been published by Princeton University Press' new Princeton-China Series (Jiang, et al. 2012). Jiang's argument that China, on account of its uniquely Confucian cultural heritage, must find its political path forward in such Confucian cultural heritage naturally appeals to those eager to recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of the idea of China. Yet readers are likely already aware from the preceding analyses that I am considerably less enthusiastic about the repercussions of such “unique” constructions of Chinese culture.

The primary target of Jiang's Confucian critiques is the idea of liberal democracy. Jiang contends that "every current of political thought in China assumes that democracy is the way ahead for China," and that this presents an unprecedented "challenge" for China as a whole (Jiang, et al. 2012:27). First, Jiang argues, democracy is a thoroughly Western institution without roots in Chinese civilization, which not only means that it could not be successful, but also that any attempt to make it successful would be a fundamental betrayal of cultural tradition. The supposed hegemony of democracy in political expectations, according to Jiang, means that "Chinese people are no longer able to use patterns of thought inherent in their own culture- Chinese culture- to think about China's current political development" (Jiang, et al. 2012:27). Cultures in Jiang's interpretation are not only mutually incompatible systems incapable of being influenced by one another, but even more importantly fundamentally closed-off spheres that must be protected, or even mummies that must be preserved against decay with the passage of time. Yet in addition to this lack of cultural correspondence, Jiang also emphasizes that this dominant ideal of democracy is in practice a fundamentally flawed system. According to Jiang, democracy is solely legitimized through and thus reliant upon the will of the people, a potentially misdirected and even disastrous will. The "extreme secularization" of democratic politics (Jiang, et al. 2012:29) ignores moral obligations, promoting a system of rights and thus of self-interest, which overlooks "much of ordinary morality that has been in human society for hundreds and thousands of years" (Jiang, et al. 2012:54). Jiang's less than glowing assessment of the state of democratic politics argues that "the exaggerated importance given to the will of the people leads to extreme secularization, contractualism, utilitarianism, selfishness, commercialism, capitalization, vulgarization, hedonism, mediocratization, this-worldliness, lack of ecology, lack of history, and lack of morality" (Jiang, et al. 2012:33). In implementation, Jiang argues that

democratic politicians thus rely upon “pandering to human desires” (Jiang, et al. 2012:29), producing a system in which the immediate and short-sighted priorities of the electorate are given precedence over longer-term concerns and moral reasoning. Democracy is thus an inferior political system of secular values and petty desires innately unfit for implementation in China, a land of longstanding civilization and morals.

In light of this perceived sad state of affairs, Jiang has taken it upon himself to develop an alternative that not only corresponds to China’s cultural traditions, but that also surpasses democracy as an even more legitimate form of government. Jiang has given this alternative political ideal the not so humble title of the Way of the Humane Authority (王道)<sup>35</sup> (Jiang 2003). This Way, according to Jiang, first emerged during the rule of the mythical ancient sage kings of the three dynasties, meaning Xia, Shang, and Zhou, and thus presents a longstanding yet largely forgotten Chinese tradition. It is a tripartite approach, founded upon the ancient Chinese cosmological vision of the world as composed of heaven (天), earth (地), and human beings (人). Utopia of the type imagined to have existed during the three dynasties then consists of the unity of these three components, captured in the idea of “the unity of heaven and man (天人合一).” Jiang’s political program aspires to an enactment of this unity via three distinct yet intertwined and mutually reinforcing forms of political legitimacy. The legitimacy derived from the concept of heaven (天) refers to “a transcendent, sacred sense of natural morality, which Jiang calls “sacred legitimacy.” The legitimacy corresponding to the earth (地) is a legitimacy “that comes from history and culture because cultures are formed through history in particular places,” which

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<sup>35</sup> A more literal translation of this Chinese term, 王道, would be the “kingly way” or the “sovereign way.” The selection of the “Way of the Humane Authority” is quite an imaginative way, in my reading, to make an anachronistic and arguably authoritarian term sound somewhat more pleasant.



he calls “cultural legitimacy.” And finally, the legitimacy corresponding to the human (人) is the legitimacy of the will of the people, which he calls “popular legitimacy” (Jiang, et al. 2012:28). In contrast to democracy’s purportedly myopic focus upon the worldly will of the people, the Way of the Humane Authority incorporates this will through popular legitimacy while at the same time surpassing it, providing additional forms of sacred and cultural legitimacy based upon transcendent moral principles and cultural traditions and thus promising, through the balance of these various forms of legitimacy, nothing less than the full integration of heaven and humankind.

Yet how are sacred, cultural, and popular legitimacies to be realized in practice? Jiang has famously proposed a tricameral legislature, with one house corresponding to each of the three forms of legitimacy. The House of Ru (also rendered as a “House of Exemplary Persons” in other translations- [Jiang and Bell 2012]) embodies sacred legitimacy derived from heaven (天). According to his plan, it is to be populated by Confucian scholars who are either nominated from amongst fellow scholars, or who have completed a course of study in the “Four Books and Five Classics” at a state-run Confucian Academy. This House is overseen by what Jiang calls “a great scholar” nominated by fellow scholars. The House of the People embodies popular legitimacy derived from the people (人). Its members are to be selected, Jiang asserts, “according to the norms and processes of Western democratic parliaments,” without any further details (Jiang, et al. 2012:41). Finally, the House of the Nation embodies cultural legitimacy derived from national history and tradition (地). Its members are “selected by hereditary criteria and by assignment” (Jiang, et al. 2012:41). The leader of this house must be a direct descendant of Confucius, who in turn oversees the selection of the House’s members “from among the descendants of great sages of the past, descendants of the rulers, descendants of famous people,

of patriots, university professors, of Chinese history, retired top officials, judges, and diplomats, worthy people from society, as well as representatives of Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity” (Jiang, et al. 2012:41). In order for bills to become law, they must pass at least two of houses. The House of Ru/ Executive Persons, according to Jiang, has final executive veto power. Revealing the troubling side of traditionalism, Jiang’s example of said veto power is not particularly reassuring, and one might note not even very traditional: “A bill, such as one permitting homosexuals to found a family, that passes the House of the People but is against the Way of heaven will be vetoed by the House of Ru” (Jiang, et al. 2012:41). Through this equilibrium between the three houses representing three divergent yet unified forms of legitimacy, Jiang argues that he has envisioned a system that is better than democracy and that accords with “the eternal and unchanging principle of legitimization” founded by “China’s ancient sages” (Jiang, et al. 2012:42).

The similarities between Jiang Qing’s Confucian Constitutionalism and the Han Clothing Movement are readily apparent. Both are founded upon an ideal vision from the distant past which is at once lacking in the present yet which at the same time represents the one and only true China. In the place where we once found the land of rites and etiquette (禮儀之邦) as imagined and celebrated within the Han Clothing Movement, we now find the land of the humane authority and the unity of heaven and earth. And as exemplars grounding these transcendent ideals, both movements claim to be able to be traced back to the most remote ancestors of the contemporary Chinese people (setting aside for the moment that both such “ancestors” are mythical figures comparable to Zeus or Adam): the Yellow Emperor in the case of Han Clothing and the “sage kings” of Yao, Shun, and Yu in the case of Confucian

Constitutionalism (Jiang, et al. 2012:186). As described above, in both cases the distance from and lack of experience of these mythical origins means that they can be imagined to have existed without the blemishes which characterize any actually experienced reality. Both instances thus rely upon the unrestrained imagining of a fantasy representing the one and only “real China,” towards which each aim to proceed as the natural yet perpetually elusive conclusion of identity.

Both cases are also founded in opposition to external cultural currents which are perceived by followers as having produced the downfall from this imagined pure internal utopia. For the Han Clothing Movement, as described in Chapter 6, the primary sources of this downfall are “the Manchus,” followed by the influx of Western culture, leading to the disintegration of the land of rites and etiquette towards which followers now yearn. As for Jiang Qing, he goes to great lengths in his Confucian constitutional proposals to argue that the greatest political challenge facing contemporary China is Western culture and the purportedly unanimous assumption that “democracy is the way ahead for China” (Jiang, et al. 2012:27). Upon closer inspection, however, Jiang’s arch-enemy seems to be just as imaginary as the nefarious activities of “the Manchus” in Han Clothing imaginaries. After all, having spent many years living and conducting research in China, I have observed many challenges facing contemporary Chinese society, just as one would observe while living in any society. Yet by no stretch of the imagination have I seen democracy as one such challenge, and even less so as the main challenge. To suggest that democracy is hindering China’s current political development is equivalent to suggesting that unicorns are blocking effective action on global warming: taking a non-existent entity as a primary challenge.

Yet despite democracy's non-existence as a pressing challenge in contemporary Chinese society and politics, it nevertheless still plays an essential role in Jiang's overall visions. Jiang portrays democracy, the perceived primary opponent of Confucian Constitutionalism, as "Western," "secular," and based solely in "desire." I analyze these three accusations in turn below, arguing that they reveal more about Jiang's own desires and anxieties than about actual democratic practice.

With regards to the first aspect of his characterization of democracy, note that Jiang invariably adds the descriptor "Western" before the term "democracy" in a compulsive act of distancing through labeling as other, similar to the type of externalizing labels popular within the Han Clothing Movement. The unexamined founding distinction of "Western" versus Chinese at the core of such thinking envisions singular cultures as mutually incompatible, closed-off from one another and existing in perpetual opposition. Based in such a binary, a uniquely Chinese path is necessary for anything and everything in China, and Jiang proposes precisely such a path for the country's political future. This rigid distinction between China and the rest, while undoubtedly appealing to the yearning for identificatory pride within its subjects, is nevertheless completely ignorant of the realities of cultural processes. On the one hand, Jiang's portrayal of singular cultures existing in opposition to one another fundamentally overlooks the long history of exchange and mutual learning within and between any and all supposedly singular "cultures." On the other hand, despite Jiang's insistent claims to the contrary, there is no singular cultural tradition that must or even can represent his imaginarily singular China. Confucianism undoubtedly played an important role in Chinese tradition. Yet if we view this Confucian constitutionalism from another perspective, it can be seen as a quite blatant although unrecognized form of Han-ism. The proposals that Jiang has suggested would be no different

from me as a white, Christian (for the sake of imagining) man proposing that on account of the purportedly unique Christian heritage of “the West,” our Constitution must be rewritten to match Christian laws and that we should find descendants of Jesus to rule over the nation as president. Such cultural conservatism would be (and when it emerges, inevitably is) dismissed as narrow-minded, exclusionary, and retrogressive. It is only within the context of cross-cultural interactions that such essentialist programs become normalized, on account of the presumed difference and thus homogeneity of those on the opposing side of the imagined binary. Yet this binary has very real-world effects, insofar as it blurs our critical recognition of the fact that Jiang Qing’s construction of a singular Confucianism representing a singular China blurs the complex and contentious history of Chinese political thought and even of the set of ideas which he calls “Confucianism” (cf. Yuan 2012).

Most importantly, however, Jiang’s framework completely overlooks the complexity of contemporary Chinese society. Certainly, Confucianism is Chinese, but could Confucianism really become a rallying cry for “the Chinese” today? Jiang’s unified Confucianism as China can only exist imaginarily in opposition to the West, wherein “the West” does things one way, while “we” follow another course, thereby completely overlooking the lively debate amongst various schools of thought in today’s China about the future of the country. This is the core function of the idea of “the West” and the supposed hegemony of “Western” democracy in Jiang’s thought. Jiang claims to counter hegemony for the purpose of independent thinking, stating that “a glance over China’s current world of thought shows that Chinese people have already lost their ability to think independently about political questions” (Jiang, et al. 2012:27). I could not agree more with the urgency of new and innovative ideas for a resolution of China’s current political stasis. Yet in the very next sentence, Jiang makes all too clear what he means by independent thinking:

In other words, Chinese people are no longer able to use patterns of thought inherent in their own culture- Chinese culture- to think about China's current political development. This is a great tragedy for the world of Chinese thought! It is, therefore, necessary to go back to the inherent patterns of Chinese culture to ground the development of Chinese political thought, rather than simply following the Western trends and forgetting our own culture (Jiang, et al. 2012:27).

Independent thinking, in Jiang's view, is only independent in relation to "the West." Domestically, thinking is unified around "inherent patterns," of which Jiang is conveniently the self-appointed interpreter. In a pattern similar to the Han Clothing Movement's construction of Han identity, Jiang encourages people to think outside the box, yet then immediately returns their thoughts to another even darker box. In countering "Western" hegemony and its supposedly stifling political expectations, Jiang reinstitutes an even more extreme hegemony in the name of "culture" and "Confucianism" with even more stifling expectations: after all, the idea that China's future must inevitably be found in its past is neither a model of independent thinking nor a particularly liberating view of politics. Anyone who proposed a similar framework for the future of a "Western" country, or even for such traditionally Confucian neighbors as South Korea, Japan, or Taiwan, simply would not be taken seriously.<sup>36</sup>

Secularism is the second component of Jiang Qing's portrayal of democracy. According to Jiang, democracy's separation of church and state "den[ies] the value of the sacred" (Jiang, et al. 2012:29) such that a democratic system can only rely upon pandering to "the common man"

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<sup>36</sup> Although such a proposal would be quite unrealistic for China's democratic neighbors, Jiang Qing, who seems to thrive on unreality, still attempts to incorporate such a recommendation into his program. His suggestion reads: "Since democracy manifests the flaw of the sole sovereignty of popular legitimacy and excludes cultural legitimacy, the political development of these countries [i.e. India, Japan, and Turkey] has turned its back on their own historical and cultural traditions. They have created a political system that is in rupture with their own tradition and without roots. This type of rootless system lacks the nourishing sustenance of the resources of the past millennia. In contrast, the Way of the Humane Authority can provide historical-cultural legitimacy, and so non-Western countries will be able to draw on their own rich resources for their political development" (Jiang 2012:39). Jiang's critique of democracy as hegemonic within Asia is then clearly not opposed to allowing an indigenous Chinese political system to assume a similarly hegemonic position within "the East" as a whole.

and “head counting” with “no regard for morality” (Jiang, et al. 2012:34). As a result of these all too worldly operations, worldly desires are “not restrained by sacred legitimacy or universal morality,” and democracy as a whole thereby “lacks morality,” giving rise to “imperialism, fascism, and hegemonism” (Jiang, et al. 2012:34). In contrast to the disenchantment of modern secular politics, Jiang proposes the immensely enchanted notion of the Way of the Humane Authority, purportedly descended from the ancient sage kings, whose mythical nature means that their feats and accomplishments thankfully are not bound by the restrictions of reality. As a result, Jiang’s political system not only promises, along the lines of Han Clothing Movement narratives, the reintroduction of “the sacred” into modern life, but furthermore seeks out as its final goal nothing less than the unity of heaven and man: no small feat.

Daniel Bell’s introduction to the recently published *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China’s Ancient Past Can Shape its Political Future* retraces Jiang Qing’s eventful intellectual development from Marxist to political Confucianist. The sole common thread between Jiang’s multiple pursuits within this intellectual history is the search for a final and complete answer to the human condition. For example, during his time as a truck repairman during the Cultural Revolution, Jiang reportedly “read Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* in his spare time and became convinced that Marx’s masterpiece would lead him to the final truth about human society” (Jiang, et al. 2012:2). Yet he soon thereafter became disillusioned with Marxism as promoted by the army and began reading the works of “Western classical liberal philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau,” in hopes that their “different perspectives could be integrated into a coherent liberal Marxist doctrine that could save China from turmoil” (Jiang, et al. 2012:3). Moving onwards toward the study of Taoist, Buddhist, and Christian spirituality, he eventually discovered Confucianism which in its political form is nothing less than “the way ahead for

China” (Jiang, et al. 2012:27). In each case, the sacred is a philosophy that promises to provide the final answer to everything, producing a marked structural similarity within the quite varied intellectual and philosophical approaches pursued in Jiang’s lifetime. Each is, following Peter Berger’s analysis of religion, a sacred canopy providing an otherwise lacking order and meaning (Berger 1967), or, following Niklas Luhmann’s analysis of religion, a contingency formula, providing a reason for why everything is not the way one would like it to be (Luhmann 2012a:86) and transforming the indeterminable into the determinable (Luhmann 2012a:111).

If Jiang Qing’s intellectual project is a perpetual search for a final and complete answer, seeking out a final closure and thus transcendent re-enchantment of society, it is not surprising that he is disillusioned by and alienated from democratic theory and the uncertainty and disharmony characteristic of its disenchanted “open society” (Popper 1963). As Yannis Stavrakakis explains in his analysis of the implications of Lacanian theory for politics, one of the benefits of democratic practice is its recognition of the fundamental division, antagonism, and incompleteness of the human condition. Stavrakakis states:

Democracy does not produce the ambiguity and the lack characterizing the human condition; it does not produce the irreducible division and disharmony characterizing every social form. It only attempts to come to terms with them by recognizing them in their irreducibility, thus producing a new post-fantasmic form of social unity (Stavrakakis 1999:125).

Democracy as political practice incorporates the incompleteness of society and the human condition into its political system. Jiang Qing’s intellectual project, founded upon the search for a final answer characteristic of so many intellectual and political projects proceeding it, is instead premised upon the denial and covering over of the resilient incompleteness of society and the human condition. His solution du jour is political Confucianism, which is presented as an ancient



and sacred form of legitimacy passed down from appropriately superhuman mythical figures against the disenchantment of the world. And just like Marxism before it, or like the Han Clothing Movement described in previous chapters, this political Confucianism promises the realization of a world in which everything operates smoothly, and in which heaven and humankind are united. The disenchantment of the world is met with a determined re-enchantment.

Implicit within Jiang's articulation of the preceding two characteristics of democracy, we are able to find notable traces of the third target of his critique, namely desire. As stated above, Jiang claims that the worldliness of democratic practice means that it is driven by "a secularized, limited, and narrow collection of human desires," which he contrasts with the "sacred, exclusive, [and] supreme" nature of political Confucianism's sacred authority (Jiang, et al. 2012:48). On account of his frequent denigrating statements regarding human desire (cf. Jiang, et al. 2012:29, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 48, 49, 66, 73, 75, 79), Jiang would appear to be absolutely opposed to the workings of desire in politics. Yet upon closer inspection of his critiques and his proposals, this repeated dismissal of the role of desire in politics is not an actual renunciation of desire, but rather an anxious and thus compulsive self-distancing from desire, which in fact infuses his own political program. In his critique of the "foreign" and "secular" nature of democracy, Jiang is in fact acting out and rationalizing his own desire for a pure and thoroughly enchanted Chinese identity, not unlike that celebrated by the Han Clothing Movement, expressed through a thoroughly indigenous and sacred politics rather than a thoroughly indigenous and sacred form of dress.

With regards to the role of identity in Jiang's politics, note that despite all of his negative assessments of democratic politics, Jiang's political framework incorporates democracy while at the same time, as he describes it, "surpass[ing]" democracy (Jiang, et al. 2012:40). Politics based solely upon people is all too worldly: the addition of cultural legitimacy and sacred morals makes politics seem considerably more hallowed. Thus if democracy is a Western and non-sacred political system, Jiang Qing's political Confucianism is able to incorporate this system within its indigenous and sacred politics. And if the former represents, in his analyses, "the West," and the latter represents "China," then this subordinating incorporation of democracy into what Jiang himself not so humbly characterizes as a "superior" system represents a national victory over the supposed hegemons (Jiang, et al. 2012:37), whose hegemony is undeserved. The desire from which Jiang continually distances himself is then the nationalist desire for a pure and superior identity within a world in which this pure and superior identity is perceived as not having been fully recognized: much like the yearnings of the Han Clothing Movement. Naturally, as the self-proclaimed interpreter of the Confucian political tradition, Jiang has much to gain from the construction of such a political identity. And on account of the resentment-based nature of the majority of national propaganda in contemporary China, Jiang's program will likely appeal to many of those whom it would disenfranchise, expressing a desire for a pure, unique, sacred, and eternally stable identity in what can only be described as an Oriental Orientalism.

### **III. The New Left as Neo-Traditionalism**

This next addition to our review of neo-traditionalisms may be unexpected. For many with similar political sympathies, the loose coalition of Chinese academics represented as "the

New Left” is on the forefront of the global struggle against capitalism and neoliberalism, and is thus on the cutting edge of global political developments. In an enthusiastic yet still quite informative overview of this movement in the introduction to the recent volume China and New Left Visions: Political and Cultural Interventions, Ban Wang and Jie Lu characterize New Leftists as “shar[ing] an intellectual consensus based on their fundamental concerns with social inequality, justice, and China’s neoliberal model of development” (Wang and Lu 2012:x). These are indeed pressing issues in contemporary China, worthy of being raised and seriously discussed. Yet beyond raising these issues, how does the New Left propose to resolve them?

New Leftism is not easy to describe as a singular whole. Nevertheless, the authors of the volume cited above usefully list four primary fields around which the New Left coalesce, and for which New Left proposals differ from those of so-called neo-liberals: social justice, capital and power, democracy, and modernity. In the field of social justice, the New Left attributes China’s growing inequality to capitalism, and thus aims to combat these trends by “maintaining public ownership of the means of production” and promoting a larger state role in market operations (Wang and Lu 2012:xi). On the topic of capital and power, rather than seeing the Chinese state as controlling and benefiting from the capitalist development of recent years, New Leftists view Chinese political power as having “been capitalized by global capitalism” (Wang and Lu 2012:xi). In terms of aspirations for democracy, the New Left “advocates participatory democracy by calling for a repoliticization and mobilization of Chinese society” (Wang and Lu 2012:xi). Finally, in relation to the question of modernity, the authors cite Wang Hui’s suggestion of “a modern society that can be produced in a way different from the historical form of capitalism, or a self-reflexive process of modernity” (qt. in Wang and Lu 2012:xi). Across

these various fields, New Leftists are unanimous in their support for drawing upon “Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies” in search of solutions.

This is where a movement dedicated to so-called “radical” ideals becomes intertwined with the types of neo-traditionalisms that have been discussed thus far. For despite the surface distinctions between the vocabulary of New Leftism and that of the Han Clothing Movement, these two movements’ structural imaginaries are in fact immensely similar. New Leftism constructs an image of an ideal time in the (not so) distant past in response to the shortcomings of the present, constructs an enemy that is deemed responsible for the disappearance of this utopia, enforces a very limiting vision of identity as the sole proper form of behavior, and aims to reconstruct their ideal image in the present as the “true China.” Each of these components will be discussed in turn below, comparing New Leftism to other forms of neo-traditionalism, in order to develop a deeper understanding of each.

#### **A. From Rites and Etiquette to Revolution and Energy**

Much like the land of rites and etiquette celebrated in Han Clothing circles, the New Left movement is similarly built around the celebration of an ideal time from the past: the Maoist era. As was the case in other neo-traditionalist movements, this romanticization is more an inversion of the present than a reflection of the past. And thanks to its conclusion three decades ago, Maoism increasingly benefits from the romanticization through distance that produces the idealization of the era of the “three sage kings” in other neo-traditionalist movements. In response to the rapidly growing inequality and social conflicts of the present, the Maoist era is

imagined as a period of greater equality and solidarity. In response to the corruption and nepotism of the present, the Maoist era is imaginarily remembered as a period of clean government in which officials served the people. In response to the wasteful state-sponsored face projects of the present, the Maoist era is imagined as a period in which state funds were solely used for the betterment of society. In response to the growing moral crisis, pervasive mistrust, and alienation of the present, the Maoist era is imagined as an era in which people worked together and helped one another. And perhaps most importantly, in response to the widespread dissolution of a sense of national mission and values, the Maoist era is imagined as a period characterized by strong moral values and political ideals. Yet again, in the national imaginary, what is lacking in the present is discovered in the past, which is perpetually home to the “real China,” this time a China of revolutionary socialist values, or, fittingly, what one might call a revolutionary “tradition.”

Yet in the end, these imaginings can only be based in blindness to the realities of the Maoist era. In reality, the problems that participants face in the present were neither resolved nor eradicated in the Maoist era: they were just covered over more thoroughly. To imagine the Maoist era as an era of equality is to forget that the glaring urban-rural divide is precisely the product of the Mao-era *hukou* system, as is the stark division of rulers and ruled in the name of “the people.”<sup>37</sup> To imagine the past as an era free from exploitation is to ignore the fact that

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<sup>37</sup> In response to a paper by Gan Yang that describes the Maoist tradition as one of “equality,” historian Yuan Weishi revealingly comments, “Gan Yang says that he wants to continue the ‘equality’ of the first 30 years of the People’s Republic. But could he be a little more specific about what that equality consisted of? Declaring, based upon the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, that some of our citizens were enemies? Transforming the majority of our population, including the peasants, into targets of “education” and thought reform? Is this real equality? Were peasants stuck in the countryside through the hukou system equal to everyone else? Were they celebrating China’s “capability to lead the world?” From “Consider everything from the viewpoint of a citizen of the world (以世界公民的眼光審視一切),” *Southern Weekly*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.infzm.com/content/26991>. See also (Yuan 2012:46-47).

Maoist socialism was nothing less than a harshly enforced state capitalism overseen by vigilant cadres in the name of “revolution.” To imagine the past as an era of clean governance is to forget the state bureaucracy’s emergence as a new class of rulers which exercised an unprecedented degree of control over the ruled, managing even their access to the most basic of goods: a power which brought with it many privileges. To imagine the past as an era in which state funds were used for the betterment of society is to forget the expropriation of harvests for ideological face projects far more disastrous than those of the present. To imagine the past as an era in which people worked together and helped one another is to forget the persistent search for the “class enemies” and “counterrevolutionaries” that reemerged as scapegoats every few years throughout this period, from the beginning of land reform through the end of the Cultural Revolution. And to imagine the Maoist era as a period of strong moral values and political ideals is to forget precisely how often those values and ideals were violated in practice. It is only through such blindness to realities that Wang Hui is able to discuss a “socialist tradition” and “socialist values” (Wang 2009), that Daniel Vukovich is able to celebrate the Marxian politics of commitment and intensity (Wang and Lu 2012:74), that Kong Qingdong is able to argue that “Mao Zedong Thought can attain victory in any and all battles,”<sup>38</sup> and that Han Deqiang is memorably able to assert that “in my heart, Chairman Mao is our Muhammad.”<sup>39</sup> Here, we once more see the desire for a national tradition of which one can be proud without regard for realities: “the real China,” again.

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<sup>38</sup> Kong Qingdong, “Mao Zedong Thought can attain victory in any and all battles” (videotaped speech on the occasion of Mao’s 119<sup>th</sup> birthday) [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDkzMjc2OTY0.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDkzMjc2OTY0.html)

<sup>39</sup> Guan Jun, Zhang Lei. “Han Deqiang: Mao is my teacher.” *Southern People Weekly*, October 12, 2012. [www.nfpeople.com/News-detail-item-3730.html](http://www.nfpeople.com/News-detail-item-3730.html)

## **B. Externalizations and Internalizations**

The first sentences of the Selected Works of Mao Zedong read as follows: “who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution.” New Leftism eagerly embraces this binary mapping of the world. Like the other traditionalisms examined in this study, the New Left naturally has an enemy (or two) to explain the lack of correspondence between their ideal vision of China and their experiential reality, as well as plenty of suggestions to realize identity of reality and their “real” China. The culprits are capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the abandonment of Mao Zedong Thought, while the solutions are naturally condemning traitors, tracking down and condemning the depredations of neoliberalism, and showing no mercy towards those who slander Mao Zedong. Each is discussed in turn below.

The New Left’s prime culprit is capitalism or its companion buzzword neoliberalism. According to Wang Hui, “in all of its behaviors, including economic, political, and cultural- even in governmental behavior- China has completely conformed to the dictates of capital and the activities of the market” (Wang 2003:141). The externalizing undertones of this sentence, portraying China as conforming to capital’s dictates, implicitly suggests that capitalism is external to “China” and that China should not conform. We can find similar sentiments in the suggestion, mentioned above, that the Chinese state, rather than overseeing and benefiting from capitalism, has instead “been capitalized by global capitalism” (Wang and Lu 2012:xi). Here, in my interpretation, we find another case of self-comforting externalization, wherein the injustices and exploitation characteristic of the current system are alienated not as something that people within China, whether the government or “capitalists,” do to one another, but rather as something

that “capitalism” or “neoliberalism” as external powers do to the Chinese people. The shattering of Maoist ideals in the reform era then becomes a violation of the imagined fundamental spirit of China. “New Leftist” commentators, in their outrage at this development, inevitably overlook the fact that these ideals had already been set aside during Mao’s reign. As such, there is arguably no better continuation of the Maoist tradition than an amoral regime which ignores Mao’s stated ideals. Yet this irony is missed by the New Left school, which somehow, despite repeated contradictory evidence, still continues to believe in Maoist rhetoric as existing in identity with the realities of the Maoist era, an identity which was never achieved, and likely never will be.

This urge to externalize, embodied in the literally obsessive use of the labels of capital, neoliberalism, and of course “the West” in New Left texts, and in the suggestion that the current situation is a betrayal of China’s supposed true revolutionary heritage, aims to ignore the extent to which capitalism has spontaneously developed in a self-reproducing cycle with people’s desires in China, and is thus arguably as “indigenous” as any other form of politics. My casual observations in this regard over the years have not given me the impression that capitalist practice is particularly “foreign” to China. Yet again, as was seen in Confucian constitutionalism, the denial of such seemingly crude desire is central to the New Left’s articulation of its illusorily more lofty desire, which is rendered as non-desire through its simultaneous condemnation of desire and its expression through the localized language of identity. Similar to the rhetoric of the Han Clothing Movement, or of Daniel Bell and Jiang Qing, both Mobo Gao and Daniel Vukovich have dramatically called the struggle against the renunciation of Maoism “the battle for China’s past” (Gao 2008; Wang and Lu 2012). The Utopia (烏有之鄉) website, the leading online New Left forum, is revealingly described in its own words not in terms of leftism or



international solidarity, but rather as “China’s largest patriotic online bookstore (中國最大的愛國主義網上書店).”<sup>40</sup> In this regard, New Leftism is nationalism, inflated through the universalist ambitions of Marxian discourse, and rationalized through the naturalizing yet unattainable ideal of identity.

Identity as an aspiration thus maintains identity as a perpetual dilemma for New Leftists, perpetually reproducing the cycle of fascination. As shown in Chapter 7, the exaltation of an unrealizable Han-ness within the Han Clothing Movement unfortunately leads to the enforcement of a strictly unified vision of identity within the movement and accompanying dismissal of those who fail to abide by this vision’s restrictions. The New Left similarly relies upon the strict enforcement of a politically correct vision of Chinese identity in the present for the exaltation of the past. The main characteristics of this identity are resisting “traitors,” condemning Western “imperialism” and “neoliberalism,” and of course loving Mao Zedong.

Kong Qingdong, one of the more outspoken and belligerent characters among the New Left, hosts a weekly online talk show entitled “Kong Qingdong has some things to say” (孔慶東有話說), in which he shares his admittedly unique perspective on current events. Yet no matter what topic he may be discussing, the “things” that Kong has “to say” usually revolve around the topic of “traitors.” It would not in fact be hyperbolic to assert that this word, often rendered as 漢奸, 賣國賊, 西奴 (meaning slave to the West) or 美奴 (meaning slave to the United States) is the most frequent word from Kong’s mouth (Zeng 2012), and that the sheer frequency of its use tends to reach levels that become unintentionally humorous. In his illustrious traitor-revealing career, Kong has discovered traitors at the relatively liberal minded Guangzhou-based newspaper

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<sup>40</sup> See the Utopia website, <http://www.wyxsds.com/index.php> Viewed April 5, 2012.

*Southern Metropolis Daily*, amongst a number of prominent scholars and authors, among Internet commentators, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and after the downfall of Chongqing Party chief Bo Xilai, even in Party Central. Kong is perhaps best known for his assertion that some Hong Kong people are “dogs.” Amidst the growing cross-border tensions that came to the fore in 2012, Kong added flames to the fire by stating that Hong Kong residents were accustomed to be “running dogs” of the British, and that all true Chinese must speak the national language of Mandarin (Zeng 2012), comments that revealed all too clearly the nationalist self-glorification often disguised through leftist vocabulary in New Leftism. Although Kong is undoubtedly the most belligerent in this regard, traitor-hunting tendencies are apparent in many authors associated with the New Left, including Mo Luo, Han Deqiang, Sima Nan, and He Xin, reminding us that the search for a purified and immaculate identity can only be supported through the parallel search for and condemnation of the impure.

Compared to the raucous Kong Qingdong, New Leftist Wang Hui appears considerably more measured. Yet in Wang’s borderline compulsive discussions of “imperialism” and “neoliberalism,” there remains a fine line between romanticized “resistance” and simply using these ideas as a scapegoat. An example of the latter can be found in Wang’s recently translated essay, “The ‘Tibetan Question’ East and West: Orientalism, Regional Ethnic Autonomy, and the Politics of Dignity,” originally composed in the aftermath of the ethnic tensions that preceded the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Wang 2011). The first part of Wang’s lengthy essay is an extended reflection upon Western colonialism, Orientalist knowledge, and the formation of the Chinese nation-state. Wang asserts that “Western knowledge of Tibet is deeply rooted in an Orientalist mind-set” (Wang 2011:138), which, he alleges, produces contemporary support in “the West” for the Tibetan independence movement. This movement, he furthermore claims without providing

any evidence, would not exist without Western support (Wang 2011:161). Wang thus contends that the crux of the “Tibet issue” is that “Tibet must liberate itself from the images held by Westerners and the myths of Shangri-la before it can make genuine progress” (Wang 2011:153). The logic of this argument is quite perplexing: are we really to believe that the primary challenge facing modern Tibet could be a few paragraphs from Kant, or the Theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky cited by Wang as evidence of Western Orientalism (Wang 2011:143, 147)? Such an argument can only make sense through its predetermined conclusion, namely that the source of the current Tibet conflict must be found outside of China, in a comfortably externalizing excuse which Wang calls “the West” or “imperialism.”

Orientalism and the imperialist incursions that it has produced then become the rationalization for an inviolable “national unity.” According to Wang, “‘the Chinese nation’ refers not just to the national entity in itself that gradually took shape over the course of several thousand years, but also to what political resistance to the Western powers over the past century transformed into a self-conscious political body” (Wang 2011:188). As a result, in Wang’s view, Chinese nationalism’s “emphasis on the principle of ‘one Chinese nation’ represents a response to the crisis of disintegration brought about by imperialist aggression” (Wang 2011:179). Such an analysis of the founding of the Chinese nation-state as a response to the wound of imperialism elicits undeserved sympathy for the idea of the nation-state, thereby rendering any Tibetan grievances as betrayals of the struggle against imperialism: just because we all know that imperialism is bad, this does not mean that the “unity” of the nation-state is inherently good. Such a framing of the issue along the China-West binary furthermore all too conveniently overlooks the fact that the Tibet issue is primarily a matter of the China-Tibet binary; and the focus upon Western imperialism all too conveniently overlooks the considerably more real

imperialism that occurs across this axis, which similarly relies upon the type of Orientalist knowledge that Wang feigns to condemn. The will to externalization on display in Chapter 6 is thus again on display in Wang's reflections on "imperialism" and the nation, legitimizing a suffocating internal harmony (Tibet= China) under the falsely unifying auspices of external enemies.

A similarly incorporating logic can be seen in the final section of Wang's paper. Finally moving beyond outdated Orientalist citations to address present-day Tibet, Wang argues that "the Tibetan question cannot be explained as being completely unique or exceptional- it must, rather, be analyzed in the context of the entirety of China's current social transformation" (Wang 2011:199). By the entirety of China's current social transformation, Wang of course means depoliticization and neoliberalism, the two keywords of his New Left analysis. It is thus through this mode of argumentation that, soon after bringing the realities of contemporary Tibet into his analyses, Wang promptly leaves behind these realities to act as if the problems in today's Tibet are the same as problems in any other region of the contemporary People's Republic. This leveling attempt to deny the unique challenges in China's frontiers erases the ethnic and historical component of the Tibet conflict, pretending as if all problems in contemporary Tibet can be understood solely through Western imperialism and neoliberalism.<sup>41</sup> This is an extremely myopic interpretation with highly selective historical amnesia, but it is an interpretation that matches Wang's desire to affirm, in the end, the very simplistic nationalist argument that Tibet is part of China, and will remain so. His concluding remarks praising the international counter-protests supporting the 2008 Beijing Olympics reveal as much: in the hyper-nationalism and

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<sup>41</sup> Engaging in further externalization, Wang proposes that the debate about the Sinification of Tibet could really be seen as a debate about Westernization, globalization, or capitalism. Even when the Western imperialist is physically absent, Wang can still develop a path to find him wherever necessary.

borderline fascism of the anti-CNN youth protecting the “sacred” Olympic torch (聖火) in its journey around the world, Wang perplexingly manages to see promises of a world perspective and internationalism, even suggesting the “birth of a new politics” (Wang 2011:226). Thus, behind Wang’s condemnation of “neoliberalism” lies a deeply conservative and narrow nationalism, and behind his critique of “imperialism” lies a rationalization of actually existing imperialism in the name of a homogenizing “leftist” ideal.

Moving from Wang’s analysis of Tibet to relations among the Han, the most famous case of a New Leftist enforcing identity emerged in September of 2012, when leading New Leftist Han Deqiang slapped an elderly gentleman for what he characterized as blasphemy against Mao Zedong. Amidst the state approved chaos surrounding the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Han Deqiang and a group of like-minded activists participated in yet another anti-Japanese protest in Beijing with a sign that read “Chairman Mao, we miss you.”

According to most accounts of the events of that day, an eighty-year-old gentleman mocked Han’s sign and his all too unwavering faith in the Chairman, arguing that aspirations for national dignity were incompatible with the figure of Mao. Naturally unable to provide an intellectually logical response to his detractor’s criticisms, Han instead slapped the elderly man across his face and called him a “traitor (漢奸),” in a step reminiscent of one Han Clothing activist’s attack on Qing historian Yan Chongnian (cf. Liebold 2010). As seen above, the exchange was captured on camera, posted online, and hotly debated. Han’s insistence that any “traitor” who blasphemes Mao Zedong deserves to be slapped, regardless of their age, was the first step in opening many netizens’ eyes to the stubborn orthodoxies of the New Left.



**Figure 26- Infamous images of Han Deqiang’s confrontation with an elderly detractor distributed on Weibo, China’s Twitter-like microblog service. Note the sign in the background that reads “Chairman Mao, the people miss you.”**  
 ([http://www.takungpao.com/edu/content/2012-10/04/content\\_1189413.htm](http://www.takungpao.com/edu/content/2012-10/04/content_1189413.htm))

Similar to the Han Clothing Movement, the New Left is a utopian organization based upon the imagining of a magical moment in the past, rationalizing the distance between their ideal and their reality through self-affirming externalization, and attempting to enforce a constraining identity constructed around opposition to “the West” and ardent love for Chairman Mao. New Leftism is, in conclusion, an unexpected neo-traditionalism under the guise of a forward-looking “resistance.”

### **C. The Chongqing Model**

Compared to the other forms of neo-traditionalism examined in this study, the New Left has come closest to implementing its ideals in reality. And it is precisely because this movement has come closest to implementing its ideals in reality that in a cruel twist of irony its ideals feel the farthest away from realization. I have in mind here the rise and sudden fall of New Left icon Bo Xilai. Bo was sent to Chongqing by the central government in 2007 to serve as the city's Party chief. In the years that followed, he turned what many had interpreted as political exile into a platform for a much-celebrated "new" model- legitimized, of course, through reference to the old. The culture of Bo's so-called Chongqing model was structured around a red culture movement, which consisted of striking against dark ("black") forces, meaning the mafia and corrupt officials, and promoting "redness," which consisted of a range of activities of varying degrees of silliness: singing "red" songs from the revolutionary era, sending "red" text messages which featured quotations from Mao Zedong, enhancing "red" programming on Chongqing television while eliminating "black" advertisements altogether, and gradually holding ever larger red song concerts, leading to the culminating mass red song performance on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

It is not surprising that Bo's "red culture" campaign generated a significant amount of support and sympathy from New Leftists. Han Deqiang, hopefully envisioning a city in which anyone who criticized Mao would be slapped, expressed his enthusiasm for Bo in a 2011 interview, stating that "the Chongqing model is the only hope for China's future" and, even more

dramatically, that “only Bo can save communism and save China.”<sup>42</sup> Another prominent New Leftist, Cui Zhiyuan, left his position at the elite Tsinghua University to serve as the assistant director of the State Asset Management and Supervision Commission in Chongqing, and soon became an eager promoter of the Bo Xilai regime. One piece of Cui’s work entitled “Partial Intimations of the Coming Whole: The Chongqing Experiment in light of the Theories of Henry George, James Meade, and Antonio Gramsci,” published in a 2011 issue of *Modern China* (Cui 2011), reads in retrospect like a slightly embarrassing advertorial for the “Chongqing model” with some light theoretical window-dressing. Cui argues that the “red song” movement must be placed in the broader context of a program promoting “ten projects for improving people’s livelihood,” which made a clearly absurd movement, in Cui’s analysis, into “a Gramscian project of hegemony” (Cui 2011:657), or even, in a Badiou-ian twist, “revitalizing the Party’s mass line a la Saint Paul!” (exclamation point in the original, 2011:657). Regardless of whether or not these attempts to fit the Chongqing experiment into these theoretical frameworks make any sense, my observations suggest that such rhetoric, like much New Left rhetoric, carried particular appeal for many academics eager to rediscover or re-imagine a “radical” China. And as suggested by the title, Cui and fellow sympathizers hoped that developments in Chongqing might become “partial intimations of the coming whole,” towards a whole and thus real China.

I visited Chongqing in the summer of 2011, in the immediate aftermath of Bo’s elaborately orchestrated red song gala, to obtain a glimpse of this so-called coming whole. Of all of the examples of neo-traditionalism and the perpetual gap between rhetoric and reality in national imaginaries, none was starker than in Chongqing. In fact, I would argue that one would

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<sup>42</sup> John Garnaut, “Profound shift as China marches back to Mao” *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 9, 2011. <http://www.smh.com.au/world/profound-shift-as-china-marches-back-to-mao-20111008-1lewz.html>



need to be living outside of Chongqing during the Bo Xilai era in order to believe that there was a Chongqing model. National flags lining the streets, elderly people gathering in parks to sing revolutionary songs, generally boring “red” television: these supposed cultural innovations are certainly not unique to the so-called Chongqing model, and are more reproductions of an already established whole than partial imitations of a coming whole. Many indeed came to identify with this illusory vision. Yet it has collapsed as quickly as any such vision could, as a result revealing the formerly hidden underside of its self-construction: the false romanticization of a past era, the construction of a binary of “good” and “bad” (i.e. “red” and “black,” or “pure” and “capitalist”), the condemnation of desire for the affirmation of another form of desire, and the willingness to sacrifice anything and anyone for the maintenance of this desire and its ideal image.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Bo’s Chongqing inherited an important tradition from Mao’s China, although it was not the tradition explicitly celebrated: it was the longstanding tradition of the forcible and unforgiving approximation of an unattainable ideal which exists at the core of the nation as ideal, reality, and self-reproducing affective process disguised through identity.

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<sup>43</sup> In the self-congratulatory strike against “dark forces,” we should remember that many quite “dark” methods were employed. Most prominently, daring defense attorney Li Zhuang was imprisoned after his client alleged torture during the crackdown on “organized crime.” Chongqing resident Fang Hong was later sentenced to two years of labor reform for jokes posted online about the Li Zhuang case that noted the similarities between Party Chief Bo Xilai’s name (薄熙來) and the Chinese term for “getting an erection” (勃起來), while also unflatteringly describing the entire “red” campaign as “a big pile of shit. Fang Hong’s incriminating comment read as follows: “This time Boqilai [erection, i.e. Bo Xilai] made a big pile of shit and told Wang Lijun to eat it. Wang Lijun brought it to the procuratorate, the procuratorate brought it to the court, and the court told Li Zhuang to eat it. Li Zhuang, the former lawyer, said he said he wasn’t hungry and that whoever made it should eat it. It got sent back to Wang, and if he doesn’t eat what his boss made, who will?”

#### IV. Rebuilding the Past in Wenchuan

Just a few days after Bo Xilai hosted his massive red song gala in Chongqing marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in July 2011, I visited the Wenchuan area of Sichuan Province. On May 12, 2008, a few months before the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics described in the first chapter, a massive 7.9 earthquake devastated this area, killing nearly 70,000, injuring hundreds of thousands, and leaving millions homeless (Ai 2009). In the years since, the many towns that were destroyed in this quake have been gradually rebuilt, with some towns specifically designated as tourist areas.<sup>44</sup>

Tourism is perhaps an unexpected choice for a region with as tragic a recent history as Wenchuan. There has been considerable controversy surrounding the earthquake and its victims, particularly on account of the concentration of deaths in collapsed elementary and middle schools. Many school buildings, such as the Fuxin No. 2 Primary School in Mianzhu, the Xinjian Elementary School in Dujiangyan, and the Beichuan Middle School in Beichuan collapsed into rubble during the first tremors, trapping schoolchildren inside. In many such cases, adjacent buildings remained standing with minimal damage. In one disturbing example, in all of Beichuan County, the Beichuan Middle School was the only building to collapse (Ai 2009). These irregular patterns led bereaved parents, many of whom had lost their only child in the quake, to presume that the schools had been constructed poorly, using sub-par materials and failing to meet relevant building standards (Liao 2010). The government's sole response to such claims has been to assert that the earthquake was simply "too big," and that the collapse of buildings can only be blamed on the quake itself (Ai 2009). In response to the state's refusal to examine or

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<sup>44</sup> "Wenchuan Tourism: Quake Town Reborn from Ashes," CCTV English, February 27, 2012. <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newshour/20120227/114837.shtml>

even acknowledge these potential issues, parents and activists such as Tan Zuoren, Huang Qi, and Ai Weiwei have promoted a citizen's investigation into the collapsed schools. Both Tan and Huang have been given lengthy and clearly arbitrary prison terms for their efforts, while Ai has faced unrelenting harassment from the authorities.

Such heated controversies were only present implicitly during my visit, in the form of a variety of carefully constructed images of national unity and victory over tragedy through the leadership of the Communist Party. As we drove through the mountainous terrain leading from Chengdu to Wenchuan, propaganda billboards littered the countryside with such slogans as "no challenges could ever conquer the heroic Chinese people," "resoluteness brings a smile to the faces of the Chinese people in times of hardship," and "let's show off Wenchuan's new face." Glancing out the window as we sped past one sign after another, we soon arrived in Shuimo Old Town. We began by visiting an earthquake museum in an elaborately reconstructed pagoda at the edge of town, where we viewed images of state leaders visiting and delivering speeches in the earthquake-ravaged region, as well as ethnic minorities in their national clothing happily dancing in the aftermath of reconstruction. Shuimo is, after all, a town inhabited by members of both the Han and the Qiang nationality, both of whom were thereby represented in this exhibition. Proceeding forward into the central thoroughfare in town, I was greeted by a seemingly endless stream of national flags hanging from both sides of the street. The placement of flags at every store along the lane, and even in spaces in between, seemed almost obsessive and slightly forced, covering over the complex recent history of the town through a carefully orchestrated patriotic spectacle whose uncertainty was revealed by the equal frequency of closed-circuit television cameras on the streets.



**Figure 27- Patriotism on display in Shuimo Old Town**

The center of town was occupied by a square appropriately called “Harmony Square” (和諧廣場). “Harmony” has emerged over the past decade as a keyword of former leader Hu Jintao, who claims that harmony (和諧) is a longstanding tradition of the Chinese people and the number one goal of the current administration. In popular use, these positive culturalist connotations have been replaced by the idea’s all too apparent political implications, such that the word is used as a verb, “harmonized” (被和諧) to refer to acts of state suppression: the deletion of internet posts, erasure of media reports, closure of blogs and newspapers, and even arrests are now jokingly referred to as “harmonization.” And correspondingly, any discussion of

the contentious recent history of this region had received similar treatment in its all too harmonious reconstruction as a patriotic tourist destination, with “Harmony Square” at its core. A clumsily blunt poster on the edge of Harmony Square showing smiling local “nomads” giving the thumbs-up sign expressed the message all too directly: “the Communist Party is good!”



**Figure 28- Smiling nomads exclaim, “the Communist Party is good!”**

Yet what was most striking in this town was not the carefully constructed discourse of national unity and victory under the leadership of the Communist Party, which was after all only to be expected in a multi-ethnic region with a troubled recent past. What was most striking about Shuimo Old Town was that despite its name, nothing about the town was in fact old: everything was new. The town itself, after having been destroyed in the earthquake, had been rebuilt anew, but in an “old” style, in the years since 2008.

Prior to the earthquake, the actually existing old town of Shuimo had been built around heavy industry, with a number of machine parts factories along the river at the base of the town, resulting in insidious water pollution. According to the history presented to us at the local museum, when these factories and the lifestyle that had been built around them were destroyed along with the rest of the village in the 2008 earthquake, they simply were not rebuilt. Instead, this town that was once an embodiment of the modernist vision with its rows of factories and army of workers was rebuilt anew as an old-style town with a “traditional” feel and “ethnic” flavor. This old town was then not old in the genuine sense, but rather in an imaginary sense, envisioning an old town as it should be, with elaborate and elegant architectural designs, expansive thoroughfares free from overcrowding, and a carefree, natural feel.

The town’s main street was lined with the type of solid stone tiles that provide a sturdy, reliable feel: precisely the kind of materials that could reassure my friend in Shenzhen, mentioned in Chapter 3, who bemoaned the unreliability of contemporary building structures. The wide thoroughfare stood in stark contrast to the narrow lanes alleys of Guangzhou as well as nearby Chengdu, as did the effective enforcement of the ban on motorcycles and motor-scooters on the walking street. Behind the rows of flags on either side of the main street were two- to

three-story buildings, made from wood rather than the concrete and tiles that are all too familiar in modern Chinese cities, and employing traditionalist architectural elements to provide a distinctive feel. The windows on the second floor of each building were decorated with elaborately carved wooden window frames, while the sweeping and overhanging roof styles were reminiscent of the powerful aesthetics of traditional architecture, for which so many traditionalists yearn. A large arch marked the transition from the central thoroughfare into Harmony Square, whose south side was occupied by a reconstructed traditional terrace which had not been destroyed in the earthquake. It had in fact already been torn down in the 1990s, but was rebuilt in the aftermath of 2008, adding to the aesthetic feel of the town as a whole. If one were to remove the Party flags from the scene, this space resembled precisely how one might imagine pre-modern China. It was as if the past century was all but a dream, which had now been surpassed to return to a more peaceful past.

Large stone steps led up to the small stores that occupied spaces in these structures, selling traditional souvenirs and snacks, such as roasted pig's face: which unfortunately looks just like it sounds. To my surprise, having traveled from my main field site in Guangzhou to the other side of the country, I found that many stores on this main thoroughfare were studios featuring both traditional and ethnic clothing for rent. Interested visitors could have their photographs taken in various ethnic styles or in imagined traditional clothing, which resembled Han Clothing but was not referred to as such. As I strolled down the town's main lane, store owners stood in their doorways, each asking if I wanted to take a picture. I chose to visit a store with the very direct name "Old-style Clothing Photographs" (古裝攝影).





**Figure 29- Old-style Clothing Photographs, Shuimo Old Town, July 2011**

Entering the store, visitors are presented with a number of clothing options to choose from, as seen below. I was promptly asked which type of “old style” clothing I might like to wear: minority clothing (民族服裝) or traditional style Chinese clothing (中國古代服飾)?





**Figure 30- Clothing options at Old-Style Clothing Photography, Shuimo Old Town, July 2011**

I decided to wear the national clothing of the Qiang, a “nomadic” minority group resident in this region of Sichuan. Taking advantage of the time preparing for my picture and fitting myself into an outfit that was a few sizes too small for me, I inquired with the owner about her life and business. She told me that business was profitable despite the many similar studios on this road,

and that life as a whole was looking positive. “We have had some tragic events. Let’s not talk about that. We’ve rebuilt. Now people come here from all over the country. It’s fun to dress up, smile a little, and have a few pictures taken with beautiful Shuimo Old Town in the background.”

Traveling to the other side of China, I found myself in a brand new “old town” surrounded by ethnic clothing. Here, where everything had been destroyed in a matter of minutes with the tremors of a massive earthquake, a new town had been rebuilt as old, illusorily burying the painful memories of the recent past through the exaltation and perpetual reenactment of a distant and glorious past. Victory was not only a victory over the tragic earthquake that devastated this region. Victory was also over a mundane modernity, the unending rows of factories, the smothering pollution, the interminable and repetitive work in the name of development, the narrow alleys, the overcrowding, and the buzzing motor-scooters. All of that, the bustle and confusion of modernity, was erased, to be replaced with an image of a traditional and harmonious existence. Here, a town was able to be rebuilt in an image that was portrayed as eternal and natural, a reconstructed real China, while visitors were similarly able to rebuild themselves in ethnic and traditional clothing studios, producing images that froze their moment of transformation in time. Everything looked right, as if this was how everything was always supposed to be, and always had been. Yet as has been true throughout the cases examined in this study, these ideal images presented as everlasting and eternal were in fact products of considerably more recent developments and challenges. And as has also been true throughout the cases examined herein, the underlying dilemmas remained, unresolved, and barely hidden beneath the new surface presented as eternal, glorious, and unchanging.

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